

REPORT

To: CORPORATE SERVICES COMMITTEE		Subject: LICENSING OF TAXI CARS - VEHICLE SPECIFICATION
From: HEAD OF LEGAL SERVICES		
Date: 11 July 2011	Ref: JM/MK	

1. **PURPOSE OF REPORT**

1.1. The purpose of this report is to consider a proposal to conduct a pilot in relation to wheelchair accessible vehicles and to extend the specification of types of cars used as taxis.

2. **BACKGROUND**

2.1. The Committee has previously, at meetings held on 4 November 2010 and 10 February 2011, considered issues in relation to specification for taxi cars and in particular wheelchair accessible type vehicles.

2.2. The Committee had noted that there had been a proposal from members of the taxi trade in relation to current policy which requires the operator of a saloon type car to upgrade to a wheelchair accessible type car when certain variations of licence holder take place, effectively creating the transfer of the licence.

2.3. The Committee determined that consideration of the issues be continued to seek views from groups representative of disabled persons within North Lanarkshire. The outcome of that approach was that one group, while noting that the current proportion of wheelchair accessible taxis is about one third of licensed vehicles, suggested that the proportion of wheelchair accessible vehicles should ideally be nearer one half. A second group suggested that a minimum of one third taxis should be wheelchair accessible and that this figure should be in place in each of the licensing areas within North Lanarkshire.

2.4. The Committee at the meeting held on 10 February 2011 authorised the Convener and Vice-Convener to meet with taxi trade representatives and otherwise continued consideration.

3. **REPORT**

3.1. A meeting was held with representatives of the North Lanarkshire Taxi Trade Association and representatives of local taxi companies who had previously expressed an interest in attending such a meeting. There was a discussion around the views expressed by the groups representative of disabled persons and the current proportion of wheelchair accessible taxis. A summary of the current numbers of taxis is appended to this report.

3.2. A number of different views were expressed by the trade members in relation to actual demand for wheelchair accessible type vehicles as recorded on databases of bookings held by taxi companies. The demand for WAVs range from less than 1% in some companies to an average of between 20% and 30% in another company. The disparity might be explained to some extent by inclusion or otherwise of pre-booked

hires as opposed to taxi stance or street hires. It can however be reasonably stated that there was not a consensus in this matter amongst trade members present.

- 3.3. During discussions a proposal emerged that the Council could consider removal of the boundary area(s) of operation for wheelchair accessible type taxis only for a pilot period to last twelve months, in order to assess whether this would increase availability of such cars within the overall Council area. During the period of the pilot operators of WAVs would be able to pick up anywhere within the North Lanarkshire area.
- 3.4. In consultation with the Convener, a letter was issued to all existing operators of taxi cars at the beginning of May 2011 seeking the views of all operators as to whether the proposed pilot would be welcomed or otherwise.
- 3.5. In summary the responses to that consultation are as follows:-
 - 3.5.1. Four individual operators and one individual on behalf of a taxi company expressed support for the proposal to conduct a pilot. The view was expressed that the proposal would result in an enhanced quality of service to the public by providing greater taxi availability throughout the region. The respondent felt that the proposal would address the situation where empty taxis bypass members of the public because they are forced to give priority to work sent to them via radio systems resulting in extended waiting times for people in taxi ranks and on the street. The respondent also suggested that if the removal of the boundary restrictions is intended to provide an improved service to the public then the amendment should apply to all taxis as it is not fair or proper that any taxi operator should be placed at an advantage or restriction compared to any other. A further two respondents agreed with the proposal as it would remove the situation where an operator deposits a hire outwith the area of initial pick-up and requires to return to the base area empty. A further respondent supported the proposal on the basis that potential customers can flag down any wheelchair accessible vehicle although the respondent expressed concern about the potential ability to sit in taxi ranks outwith the licensed area as this could lead to conflict with saloon taxis from that area.
 - 3.5.2. Ten individual operators intimated that they do not support the proposal to conduct a pilot. An operator from the north area expressed a view that the proposed scheme will be impossible to guarantee an equal spread of available vehicles throughout the North Lanarkshire area and suggested that the north area would be effectively subsidising the central and south areas. An operator from the south area expressed the view that the proposal would not benefit any party and would only mislead and confuse the public and further would cause resentment between taxi operators and companies alike. The respondent suggested that the status quo policy be maintained until at least 40% WAV vehicles are supplied in all licensing areas. An operator from the south area suggested that the current numbers of WAVs available in the south area are sufficient to meet demand and expressed the view that in the present economic downturn the proposal, should it proceed, would lead to a reduction in income for licence holders in the south area. The respondent also expressed concern about the lack of information as to what criteria will be used to determine the success or failure of the pilot should it proceed. An operator from the central area expressed the view that the proposal will not make any difference to a customer with a disability, whom the respondent considers would telephone or book a WAV. The respondent also made reference to the high cost of running a WAV particularly if this is linked to running the vehicle from an office base. An operator from the central area

expressed the view that there are more than enough WAV taxis working in that area without taxis coming in from other areas. An operator from the central area expressed opposition to the proposal stating that excessive numbers of taxis will sit at the best spots over North Lanarkshire. An operator from the south area stated that the proposal is unnecessary as there are already a large number of WAVs working in the south area. An operator from the central area stated that there is currently not enough work in the central area for licensed taxis far less allowing taxis from other areas to come in and operate.

- 3.5.3. A company from the north area expressed a view that the proposed pilot would not guarantee an equal spread of WAVs throughout the North Lanarkshire area and felt that the north area would effectively be subsidising the other areas. A company from the south area opposes the proposal on the basis that it will not achieve greater WAV supply in some areas. The respondent made reference to the positive advantage of local service provision, particularly in that operators working in a different area from their own will not know the shortest route leading to increased expenditure for the client. It was stated that Satnav systems cannot be depended upon to secure the shortest route. The respondent also made reference to potential conflict between operators and drivers from different areas and between operators of WAV vehicles and saloon vehicles as the latter would not be able to undertake hires outwith their licensed area. The respondent suggested that the present policy should be maintained until a defined percentage of WAV vehicles is achieved in each of the three licensing areas.
- 3.5.4. A petition signed by 86 operators within the south area stated that the signatories are firmly against the proposal to remove boundary areas of operation for wheelchair accessible vehicles as they do not think there is a problem regarding availability of WAVs in their area. The signatories make reference to the issue of a number of additional licences for WAVs in 2004 and the current number of compulsory and voluntary WAVs presently available. The signatories believe that the policy if implemented will reduce the income for licence holders in the south area.
- 3.5.5. A pro forma letter was submitted by 25 operators within the north area stating that the signatories cannot see the Council's reasoning and lodging an objection in principle to this trial period.
- 3.6. It is now a matter for decision whether, in consideration of the background and the response of trade members, to proceed with the proposed pilot in relation to removal of areas of operation for the operators of wheelchair accessible vehicles. In relation to evaluation, should the pilot proceed, it is suggested that further views could be obtained at the end of the trial period from the disabled groups previously consulted and from taxi operators. Additionally specific information could be sought from respondents to the next independent study of demand for taxis as to whether the pilot has had any appreciable impact on availability of wheelchair accessible vehicles across North Lanarkshire. Should it be decided not to proceed with the proposed pilot and should it be the view of the Committee that the current number and distribution of wheelchair accessible vehicles is less than optimum, it is an option to simply maintain the status quo arrangement, whereby operators of saloon cars require to upgrade to a WAV on the occurrence of certain variations of licence, pending the conduct of a further independent study of demand for taxis, when demand for saloon type cars versus wheelchair accessible type cars can be studied in greater detail.
- 3.7. The report to the meeting of Committee held on 10 February noted that there had been a request that the Council give consideration to amending the specification for

taxi cars to permit estate type cars as an alternative option to saloon cars. It had been submitted that this would improve choice for passengers particularly in relation to carriage of luggage. Members can be advised that this is an option already approved in relation to vehicles specified for use as private hire cars. The Transport Manager has been consulted on this proposal and has no adverse comment. This is a matter which can be considered without prejudice to the wider discussion on wheelchair accessibility.

4. **CORPORATE/FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS**

- 4.1. The matters under consideration in this report reflect the Council's commitment to keep regulation of taxi licensing under review. There are no immediate financial implications arising from the matters under consideration.

5. **DECISIONS**

- 5.1. The Committee is asked to determine whether to proceed with the proposed pilot in relation to removal of areas of operation for taxis of the wheelchair accessible type for a period of 12 months.
- 5.2. The Committee is asked to agree to extend the specification of taxi cars to permit suitable estate type cars to be used as taxis.



Head of Legal Services

NORTH LANARKSHIRE TAXI LICENCES

Area	Numerical Limit	Licences at Issue	Compulsory WAVs	Voluntary WAVs	Saloons
North	55	55	55	0	0
Central	238	242	23	20	199
South	182	202	44	11	147
Total	475	499	122	31	346