

## QUAD OF AIMS (MEMBERS' REQUEST FOR ITEM TO BE CONSIDERED BY SCRUTINY)

### SECTION 1 TO BE COMPLETED BY MEMBERS

**NOTE** – This document should only be completed if there is a clearly defined and significant outcome from any potential further work. This document should **not** be completed as a request for or understanding of information.

REASON FOR REQUEST?	RESOURCE (WHAT OFFICER SUPPORT WOULD YOU REQUIRE?)
Complaint from wheelchair user re lack of wheelchair 'friendly' taxis in Darlington	<u>Licensing Manager and clerk</u>
PROCESS (HOW CAN SCRUTINY ACHIEVE THE ANTICIPATED OUTCOME?)	HOW WILL THE OUTCOME MAKE A DIFFERENCE?
Investigate possibilities for improving the current situation.	Increase the number of wheelchair accessible taxis in the Borough.

Signed Councillor B Jones.....

Date ...4<sup>th</sup> January 2022.....

**SECTION 2 TO BE COMPLETED BY DIRECTORS/ASSISTANT DIRECTORS  
(NOTE – There is an expectation that Officers will discuss the request with the Member)**

	<b>Criteria</b>
<p>1. (a) Is the information available elsewhere? <span style="float: right;"><b>Yes</b></span></p> <p>If yes, please indicate where the information can be found (attach if possible and return with this document to Democratic Services)</p> <p><b>See Section 6</b></p> <p>(b) Have you already provided the information to the Member or will you shortly be doing so?</p> <p><b>Cllr Keir and Cllr B Jones have been advise of the position in email .</b></p> <p>2. If the request is included in the Scrutiny Committee work programme what are the likely workload implications for you/your staff?</p> <p><b>This will require both legislative and policy changes and potentially have a financial impact on the council and operators at a time when the focus is restoring numbers of drivers to address the current pressures and demands on the taxi trade.</b></p> <p>3. Can the request be included in an ongoing Scrutiny Committee item of work and picked up as part of that?</p> <p><b>A liaison group with the taxi trade has already been established to deal with this issue but has not met for a while due to covid restrictions. Covid has made the situation worse as many drivers left the trade meaning there are often no drivers for the wheelchair accessible vehicles currently on the fleet.</b></p> <p>4. Is there another Council process for enquiry or examination about the matter currently underway?</p> <p><b>This complaint is a direct consequence of a national shortage of taxi drivers following the removal of covid restrictions, however it is recognised that there is little incentive for taxi owners to invest in a wheelchair accessible vehicle as they are considerably more expensive. There is an action plan in place to address the shortage of drivers</b></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Information already provided/or will be provided to Member</li> <li>2. Extent of workload involved in meeting request</li> <li>3. Request linked to an ongoing Scrutiny Committee item of work and can be picked up as part of that work</li> <li>4. Subject to another Council process for enquiry or examination (such as Planning Committee or Licensing Committee)</li> <li>5. About an individual or entity that has a right of appeal</li> <li>6. Some other substantial reason</li> </ol>

5. Has the individual or entity some other right of appeal?

**Neither taxi legislation or our policy make having a wheelchair accessible vehicle a mandatory requirement**

6. Is there any substantial reason (other than the above) why you feel it should not be included on the work programme?

The Council are aware of the issue identified in the Quad of Aims and have considered local policies that are not feasible not financially practical for the Council or operators. The Council continues to keep this matter under review with a view to trying to assist and facilitate disabled users requirements for taxi trips. Some background on the matter is contained below.

The lack of wheelchair accessible taxis (WAV) is an issue that the Council has been aware of for a number of years. This has recently been exacerbated by a national shortage of taxi drivers, as covid restrictions forced many drivers to find new employment opportunities and they have not returned to the trade. We currently have 405 licensed drivers in Darlington, which is 100 less than the month preceding covid restrictions in 2020. We also recognise that a number of drivers still retain their taxi licence, however they no longer drive taxis. It is estimated that since July 2021, nationally the trade has 30 - 40% fewer drivers available, and this is reflected in Darlington. There are currently 10 WAV's licensed with us (6 hackney carriage and 4 private hire.)

The number of WAV's in Darlington has traditionally been low and this is the case for many smaller local authorities where taxi operators have smaller fleets. There is no mandatory requirement for a specific number of WAV's and market forces will generally determine whether an operator or independent driver is willing to invest in a WAV.

Buying a WAV is considerably more expensive than an ordinary saloon vehicle along with increased running costs, so businesses will only invest in these vehicles if there is sufficient demand. As a driver cannot by law charge more for a disabled person, there is no financial benefit for investing more in a WAV vehicle, which is one of the reasons why drivers are reluctant to invest in these vehicles at the moment. Drivers of WAV's also find that due to the small number available at any one time, they travel greater distances to collect passengers and they spend longer assisting the passenger in and out the vehicle, which again reduces their business opportunities.

Officers meet regularly with the trade prior to the covid pandemic and work closely with Darlington Association on Disability (DAD) in an attempt to resolve issues as they arise. We also offer a number of incentives for drivers to invest in

WAV's in our policy, which was published in 2021. This includes reduced licence fees and allowing these vehicles to remain on the fleet for longer. Measures such as making it a mandatory requirement for all vehicles to be WAVs has been discounted due to the huge cost to the taxi trade.

A requirement for all new taxis to be WAV's was also discounted as experience from other local authorities was that the number of new taxi applications dramatically reduced, with vehicles only being renewed on a like for like basis. Smaller vehicles adapted for wheelchairs are available, however they have a reduced capacity, meaning they are less attractive for businesses to purchase. Some of the operators in large towns and cities have been able to make bulk purchases of this type of vehicle to reduce their cost, however this is not something operators in Darlington are considering at the moment.

We, as a local authority cannot force businesses to make a purchase of a vehicle, even though we recognise there is a shortage. A few years ago DAD attempted to get round this problem by purchasing their own WAV to operate. This was at a huge cost and could not be financially sustained as it was heavily subsidised by public funding.

As a short term measure to address the shortage of taxis generally we are advising that people pre-book taxis well in advance of their intended journey whenever possible. Demand at peak times is high, so to ensure a taxi, it needs to be prebooked days ahead. Although there are a number of Hackney Carriage WAV's in Darlington, there is no guarantee that they will be waiting on the ranks.

In accordance with government recommendations, the Licensing Department publishes an up to date list of all WAV's on its website <https://www.darlington.gov.uk/media/7338/wheelchair-accessible-vehicles-2021.pdf> Within that list are hackney carriage drivers who provide direct contact details, as calls are not required to go through an operator. Wheelchair users who regularly require taxis often contact the same driver to make a booking, as that driver develops an greater understanding of the individual's needs. A recent complainant who was frustrated at not being able to book a WAV through an operator and was provided with direct contact numbers for the hackney carriage WAV vehicles.

Another consequence of the driver shortage is that demand is quite high during the day so drivers are not working late into the night, resulting in fewer taxis to service the night time economy.

Darlington work closely with neighbouring Tees Valley Authorities and are part of the North East Strategic Licensing network where this issue is frequently discussed.

**Signed ...Dave Winstanley..... Position ...Group Director of Services ..... Date ...8<sup>th</sup> February 2022.....**