# 8    Assessment of Taxi Services for people with disabilities

## 8.1    Review of Existing Provision

There are currently some 11 wheelchair accessible hackney carriage vehicles licensed in Torbay equating to 6.8% of the fleet. There are 21 wheelchair accessible vehicles in the private hire fleet equating to 7.4% of the private hire fleet. Figure 8.1 details the proportion of wheelchair accessible vehicles in the Torbay hackney fleet against its comparable authorities.

Figure 8.1 Proportion of hackney fleet that is accessible
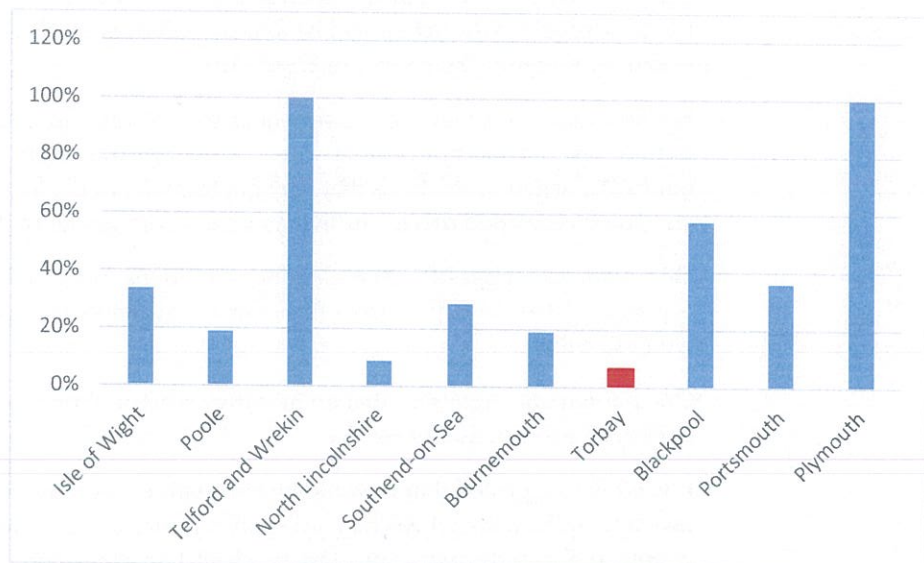


Torbay has the lowest proportion of wheelchair accessible vehicles in the hackney fleet. Telford and Plymouth have the highest at 100%.

Discussion with a number of UK licensing authorities identified a number of ways that they were trying to increase the proportion of wheelchair accessible vehicles. Brighton and Hove Council looked to encourage the tale up of WAVs in two ways:

Firstly, they insist that all vehicles that are able to carry 5+ passengers must be a WAV. These vehicles are then able to charge 1.5times the fare when carrying more than 5 passengers.

Secondly and Brighton's greatest success is the policy of ensuring that when a vehicle is 'transferred' to another person it must become a WAV at renewal. This has resulted in an increase of the WAV fleet from 23% in 2010 to a current level of 40%.

West Dunbartonshire Council have tried to address this problem. The Committee determined that 20% of the hackney fleet should be WAVs. The authority are looking to consult with the trade on how best this is achieved.

Stroud District Council have recently taken steps to encourage the purchase of WAVs. Following a benchmarking exercise the authority decided to waive 50% of the application fee if an application related to a WAV. This policy came into being in June 2014 and is for a period of 12 months, when it will be reviewed.

## 8.2    Demand for Wheelchair Accessible Vehicles

A focus group was held with members of the Torbay Coalition of Disabled People. One of the group used a motorised wheelchair.

Attendees had varying levels of usage of taxis in Torbay. Those who could use public transport preferred to do so as they found this much cheaper.

The overall view from the group was that there is no one vehicle that can satisfy everyone's needs. One of the attendees preferred a saloon vehicle as he prefers to transfer from his wheelchair and he found minibuses or purpose built taxis too high to step into. Other participants preferred MPVs.

Participants stated that when using taxis they always seemed to feel that 'they were putting taxi drivers out of their way.'. However the group said that they tended to ignore the negative reactions that they got from the trade. It was noted that there were also some very good drivers in Torbay who would go out of their way to help.

One attendee suggested that training should be provided to operators. On one occasion when this lady's usual firm weren't available the operator stated 'the driver won't like that'.

One participant suggested that an incentive scheme should be introduced for drivers, to reward good customer service.

It was also suggested that it would be of benefit for Torbay Council to provide a list of taxi operators with wheelchair accessible vehicles. This would make it easier for people to obtain the most appropriate wheelchair accessible vehicle.

## 8.3    Mystery Shopper Exercise

Three members of the Torbay Coalition of Disabled People agreed to take part in a mystery shopper exercise. A number of journeys were arranged by both ambulant disabled people and those unable to transfer from a wheelchair. Seven journeys were attempted in total. Out of the 7 journeys only 6 were undertaken – on one occasion the operator did not have any available wheelchair accessible vehicles and so the individual was unable to make the journey. Each taxi journey was rated on a list of criteria (see table 8.1). With regard to the ease of prebooking the vehicle, the majority were happy with the level of service.

However when shoppers were asked to rate the length of time they had to wait for a vehicle, on two occasions the rating was 'very poor'. On one occasion the vehicle was sent to the wrong address and on the second occasion there was a 90 minute wait for an accessible vehicle. Of those individuals requiring to use the ramps, all were satisfied with the correct use of the ramps. Overall the mystery shoppers were pleased with how their wheelchairs were clamped into the vehicle. However on two

occasions when travelling in a Peugeot Partner the user noted that they were only clamped in by one clamp – but they did not know if this was a quirk of the vehicle. Customer Service was rated highly be the majority of traveler's. The majority of travelers considered the price to be 'average' and one mystery shopper noted differences of a £1 in price for the same journey. Quality of driving was also rated highly. However when the type of vehicle was rated there was a greater variation in rating. On one journey the vehicle was rated as' very poor' because it was a minibus and the individual had difficulty accessing the vehicle. On the occasions where the vehicle was rated as 'Poor' this was due to the lack of headroom in the vehicle – a Peugeot Partner.

Additional comments were made by one user who liked the smaller Ford transit vehicle for travelling in.

*Table 8.1 Journey Ratings*

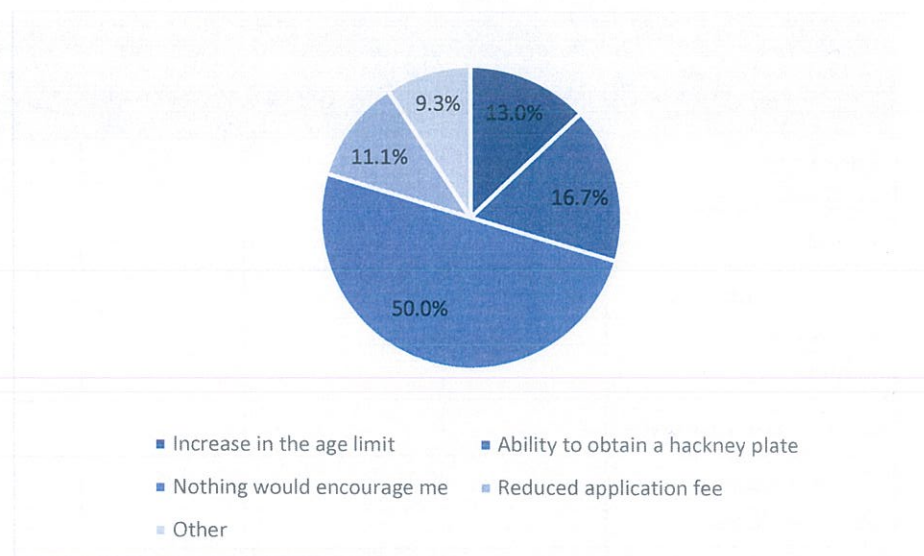| | Very Poor | Poor | Average | Good | Very Good |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Ease with prebooking the vehicle | | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓✓✓✓ |
| Length of time had to wait for the vehicle | ✓✓ | | ✓ | | ✓✓✓ |
| Correct use of ramps | | | | | ✓✓✓✓ |
| Correct securing of the wheelchair | | | ✓ | ✓✓ | ✓ |
| Customer Service | | | ✓✓ | ✓✓ | ✓✓ |
| Price | | | ✓✓✓✓ | ✓✓ | |
| Quality of Driving | | | ✓ | ✓✓✓ | ✓✓ |
| Type of vehicle | ✓ | ✓✓ | ✓ | ✓✓ | |

## 8.4    Trade Survey

As part of the trade postal survey detailed in Chapter 7, members of the trade were asked why they had a wheelchair accessible vehicle. Only nine of the respondents drove a wheelchair accessible vehicle. Their reasons for purchasing their vehicle were:

- 'Flexibility – can carry up to 8 passengers'; and

- Versatility;

- Best on the market

Members of the trade were then asked what would encourage them to buy a wheelchair accessible vehicle. Out of the 107 people who responded to this question Figure 8.2 details the results.

*Figure 8.2 What would encourage you to purchase a wheelchair accessible vehicle?*



- Increase in the age limit
- Ability to obtain a hackney plate
- Nothing would encourage me
- Reduced application fee
- Other

Half of respondents stated that nothing would encourage them to purchase a wheelchair accessible vehicle. Some 9.3% of respondents stated 'other'. Suggestions included:

- Increase in wheelchair work;

- Luxury wc accessible vehicles;

- An increase in the taxi fare;

- £15k subsidy towards the cost of the vehicle;

- Guaranteed a reasonable amount of work;

- To be offered a long term contract by Torbay Council;

## 8.5     Recommendations

The trade survey indicated that some 50% of the trade could not be incentivised to purchase a WAV. However this still leaves the remaining 50% of the trade. It is clear from the consultation that a policy of 100% WAV is not suitable for everyone – passengers and the drivers themselves. Before the authority look to increase the number of WAVs in the fleet it is our recommendation that the current WAVs are well publicised and promoted through Torbay Council website and the Coalition of Disabled People. As most WAV users prebook their vehicle it is imperative that users know how to contact the operators of these vehicles.

Once this has been undertaken we feel that the authority should introduce a number of incentives to drivers over a period of time. If these do not work, we suggest the removal of the numerical limit together with the introduction of a high quality WAV policy. This will ensure that there will be considered investment into the trade with high quality, relevant WAVs.

Prior to this we recommend the following:

- change in the policy for 'transferred' vehicles – this has proven successful in Brighton;

- period of 6 months where the application fee for a WAV is reduced.