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THE DATA COLLECTION SPECIALISTS

**Watford Borough Council
Taxi mystery shopper
test purchase
Final Report**

June 2015

In association with
Social Research Associates



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CTS Traffic & Transportation Ltd.
Unit 14 Aqueduct Mill, Aqueduct Street, Preston, PR1 7JN
Tel: (01772) 251 400 Fax: (01772) 252 900
E-mail: enquiries@ctstraffic.co.uk Web-site: www.ctstraffic.co.uk

Data Quality Assurance:

Report by: Ian Millership

Date: 26/06/15

Checked by: Joe Maclaren

Date: 26/06/15

Executive summary

CTS Traffic and Transportation in partnership with Social Research Associates were appointed by Watford Borough Council to undertake their taxi mystery shopper test purchase study on 19th February 2015. The Council (WBC) is seeking research to aid WBC in obtaining an overview of the general situation with respect to compliance with disability awareness training and legal requirements upon drivers with respect to their fair treatment of those travelling with disabilities. The project is specifically **NOT** to obtain evidence for use in prosecution or other enforcement action.

The report includes an analysis of the current licenced vehicle fleet (as at February 2015) which shows that the total hackney carriage fleet is 279 of which 27% are wheelchair accessible. There are also 126 private hire vehicles none of which are wheelchair accessible. Thus the total licenced vehicle fleet is 19% wheelchair accessible.

The mystery shopping research was carried out during March and April 2015, with two tranches of 26 trips comprising a mix of disabilities including wheelchair users, ambulant disabilities, deafness, blindness, learning difficulties and mental illness. The mystery shopping exercises have shown that there are a number of problems with only two out of 26 trips being completely satisfactory.

On the other hand most drivers knew the routes and most charges were correct and there were also some very good examples of helpfulness in relation to customer care.

The biggest problems relate to travel by wheelchair users. There was an alarming record of poor or non-existent securing practice not to mention reluctance by many drivers to carry wheelchair passengers. The same applies to people travelling with guide dogs.

Communication skills are also lacking largely due to lack of appropriate knowledge, embarrassment or awkwardness rather than deliberate rudeness.

1. Introduction

Watford Borough Council (WBC) is responsible for the licensing of hackney carriage and private hire vehicles operating within the council area. A cap on the number of hackney carriage vehicles was re-introduced to the area on 19th March 2012 by the Licensing Committee. A reducing limit policy was also introduced meaning that licences surrendered or revoked will not be reissued. Current vehicle licences however can be renewed, updated or transferred to another owner. Applications for new vehicle licences can be made and will be considered but only granted in exceptional circumstances by the Licensing Committee.

Over recent years, WBC has strengthened their disability training for licensed vehicle drivers. The training has also included operators, of whom ten have been briefed directly about their responsibilities.

Study timetable

Watford Borough Council appointed CTS Traffic and Transportation (CTS) in partnership with Social Research Associates (SRA) on 19th February 2015 to undertake this "taxi mystery shopper test purchase" study. The final scope of the study was confirmed at the inception meeting, held on Friday 20th February 2015 by telephone conference.

The review was carried out during March and April 2015, with tranche 1 shopper trips completed by 14 March and tranche 2 by Tuesday 28th April 2015. A Draft Final report was submitted and this was reviewed in May 2015 to identify any factual or missing issues. The Final Report was issued in June 2015.

National background and definitions

At the present time, hackney carriage and private hire licensing is carried out under the Town Police Clauses Act 1847 (as amended by various further legislation including the Transport Act 1985, especially Section 16) in regard to hackney carriages and the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1976 with reference to private hire vehicles. A number of modifications have been made within more recent legislation and through case law.

The current status of legislation / practise with respect to how licensed vehicles meet the needs of those with disabilities sees a limited number of measures in place and a much larger number of potential measures as yet to be enacted or consulted upon before further moves might be made towards their becoming legislation.

The Equality Act 2010 includes a number of sections relating to hackney carriage and private hire and how individuals who are these vehicles customers should be protected from unfair treatment. Sections 160 to 173 provide a range of provisions which affect hackney carriage and private hire vehicles in different manners.

Sections 168 to 172 relate to assistance dogs and exemption on medical grounds for drivers if unable to service such requests. These sections are in force. None of the other sections are yet in place.

For the sake of clarity, this report will refer to 'licensed vehicles' when meaning hackney carriage and private hire collectively, and to the specific type when referencing either specific type of vehicle. The term 'taxi' will be avoided as far as possible, although it has to be used in its colloquial form when dealing with the public, few of whom are aware of the detailed differences. In fact, in some authorities the distinction between vehicle types can be relatively moderate – for example some authorities allow meters in private hire vehicles or require private hire to have roof signs and / or liveries, whilst in some places hackney carriages require very little distinctive in their appearance to the local private hire vehicles.

Review aims and objectives

Watford Borough Council (WBC) is seeking research to aid WBC in obtaining an overview of the general situation with respect to compliance with disability awareness training and legal requirements upon drivers with respect to their fair treatment of those travelling with disabilities. The project is specifically **NOT** to obtain evidence for use in prosecution or other enforcement action.

Scope of works and objectives

Watford Borough Council suggested the scope of work required as follows:

- A mystery shopper programme that adequately tests both taxi and private hire trades
- Sufficient visits to ensure that an accurate picture of trade and customer service to those with disabilities can be gauged
- Headline results from each tranche of surveys
- Recording of any additional relevant / helpful information from individual shoppers

In order to meet Watford Borough Council's objectives, a methodology was adopted which is further detailed in Chapter 3. The methodology used includes drawing guidance from both the 2004 DfT letter and their 2010 Best Practice Guidance (which includes the 2004 guidance as an appendix), as well as issues raised by the LC recommendations together with experience of similar studies.

Report structure

This Report provides the following further chapters:

- Chapter 2 – current background to taxi licensing statistics and policy and background information setting the scene of what is available to those with disabilities needing to use licensed vehicles in Watford
- Chapter 3 – results from the two mystery shopping exercises
- Chapter 4 - recommendations arising from this review.

2. Background to licensed vehicles in Watford in 2015

The Watford Borough Council area

Watford is one of the two major suburban regional centres of Hertfordshire located just north of London at a key interchange on the West Coast Main Line railway route. Over the next few years the Metropolitan underground line, which presently terminates in the suburban west of Watford itself, will be extended through to serve both Watford High Street and Watford Junction stations, making the Junction station (itself presently just having been rebuilt) even more a focus of passenger arrivals in the town.

Watford Borough licensing area has some 92,096 resident head of population according to the 2015 estimates from the latest 2011 census results. Of these some 13% are aged 66 or more.

The main shopping centre, just recently refurbished and renamed the 'intu Watford Shopping Centre' runs south-north along the axis of High Street between High Street railway station and the Town Hall. The centre of this axis is also the centre of the main night life area which draws large volumes not only from Hertfordshire but also from the London area and has a wide catchment. Many large companies have their headquarters in Watford and tourism has received a more recent boost with the development of the Warner Brothers studios.

A large number of people pass through Watford on journeys to a wide range of locations including Heathrow Airport and major tourist and business destinations including the Warner Brothers studios. Some leave Watford to work in London and other locations, others come in to shop or work in Watford central area. This makes provision for those with disabilities much more important to this area than for other places with more local journeys and focus.

Watford Borough is surrounded on three sides by the more rural Three Rivers licensing authority whose vehicles do provide some trips that might be felt to be due to Watford licensed vehicles, although these need to be excluded from any research as our focus is on Watford Borough provided licensed vehicle services. Watford residents may find it hard to differentiate such vehicles based on phone number differentiation although Watford vehicles are clearly identified. Our research focusses on the tight Watford Borough area whilst acknowledging that Watford Borough licensed vehicles will also undertake trips with just one end within the Borough – at least legally.

Background statistics

WBC currently licences both hackney carriage and private hire vehicles and has a clear set of conditions defined for differentiating both vehicle types (last updated in September 2011). The style of differentiation of vehicles has changed over the years but has remained the same since the revisions instigated in 2011.

Hackney carriage vehicles, which can pick up at ranks, be hailed or can operate through phone bookings, are differentiated by having a roof sign and door signs with the local authority crest. In the past these vehicles have also been painted black and white but this has not been the case for some while. Private hire vehicles can be differentiated from private cars and from hackney carriages by door signs clearly identifying them as Watford private hire vehicles. These signs also clearly state that the vehicle is for advanced bookings only.

Further, the vehicle can advertise the company it belongs to but that company must not have the words 'taxi' or 'cab' in their titles or on-vehicle advertising. The vehicle can be any colour but not white. For some disabilities, ability to be reassured that the vehicle is the one they have booked, or is one from a known provider, can be important.

Location of the 'plate' confirming the licensing of both hackney carriage and private hire vehicles is 'prescribed by the Council's inspecting officer' (private hire conditions). This is normally located on the rear bumper of the vehicle. Our demand study for the Council in 2011 proved that people had generally understood the change in how to differentiate vehicles and that the key sign to look for with a hackney carriage was the roof sign followed by the door sticker. Hackney carriages can be any colour, and those added when there was no limit had to be wheel chair accessible or have a swivel cushion and be capable of carrying a wheel chair folded.

Information was obtained to demonstrate the current make-up of the licensed vehicle fleet in the Watford Borough Council area, including current vehicle trends. The table below shows the historic level of vehicle numbers in this area, the split between private hire and hackney carriage and the level of wheel chair accessible vehicles in each fleet.

Hackney carriage vehicles (%WAV)	Private hire vehicles (%WAV)	Total licensed vehicles f	Driver numbers				Operators	
			Hcd	Phd	Dual	Total		
DfT 2005 data suggests limit began in 1985, removed 2006, replaced 2012								
1994	61	unknown	n/k	122	n/k	n/k	n/k	n/k
1997	63 (3%)	118	181	124	185	0	309	n/k
1999	63 (5%)	282	345	109	194	(109)	303	7
2002	63 (13%)	202	265	121	271	0	392	10
2004	63	450	513	0	0	665	665	44
2005	73 (42%)	199	272	131	235	0	366	12
2007	213 (23%)	92	305	57	54	254	365	25
2009	249 (36%)	69	318	0	0	404	404	23
2010	249 (18%)	135 (26)	384	Not collected				
2011	303 (19%)	115 (0)	418	0	0	442	442	20
2012	304 (25%)	116 (1)	420	Not collected				
2013	304 (18%)	161 (0.0)	465	0	29	484	513	10
2014 NPHA	295 (20%)	118 (0)	413	Not collected				
2015	279 (27%)	126 (0)	405 (19)					

Note: DfT statistics used from 1994 to 2009, 2011 and 2013.
 National Private Hire Association surveys for 2010 / 2012 and 2014.
 Council statistics provided end of Feb 2015.

The table above demonstrates that there are presently just over 400 licensed vehicles in the Watford licensing area – and that private hire vehicles make up 31% of the licensed vehicle fleet. This is a result of the period when there was no limit on hackney carriage vehicle numbers – before which the private hire fleet was around 66% of the total fleet. Private hire vehicle numbers are now very similar to what they were in 1997 when statistics were first collected. In comparison, hackney carriage numbers are now well over four times their 1994 level.

What is most interesting from the point of view of this survey is that there are no wheel chair accessible vehicles in the private hire fleet. At February 2015 just over a quarter of the hackney carriage fleet are wheel chair accessible. This means that there is about a fifth of the overall fleet wheel chair accessible. Further comments about the impact of this (and the practical outworking for those with disabilities) are discussed below.

The 'settling' limit set on hackney carriage vehicle numbers in 2012 is seeing some impact, with around an 8% drop in hackney carriage vehicle numbers since the 2012 peak. Private hire vehicles have generally stayed about the same level since 2010.

Driver numbers are presently about 66% higher than in 1997, although these are not much higher than the number of vehicles suggesting most vehicles tend to be operated by a single driver. There was a shift to a single driver type around 2008. Operator numbers have halved in the last two sets of information from a high of 44. The level of 10 is the same as it was in 1999.

Availability of licensed vehicles in Watford

Whilst there are other smaller centres around the Borough, including supermarket sites and business parks, and some suburban hackney carriage ranks, the main focus of hackney carriage ranking remains at Watford Junction station – and is likely to do so for some while. In 2011 this location saw 52% of passenger hiring from ranks.

The focus of any hackney carriage journey research will need to be journeys originating at this location, radiating to various places within the Borough (but acknowledging that there can also be longer distance trips from here including to Heathrow Airport). The next largest rank in passenger terms is Rickmansworth Road although this is principally a night location mainly operating at weekends. Other High Street (formal and informal) locations (including Central Rank and Lower High St) took some 19% of passengers in 2011 – generally providing shopping to home trips which are much more likely to be local residents.

Many of the hackney carriage fleet belong to radio or private hire circuits which increases their availability and can be important for those with disabilities who do not wish to risk finding an appropriate vehicle at a rank for their return trip. The breakdown of the current fleet in terms of telephone availability is a key factor in setting up our surveys (see discussion below).

The private hire vehicles service telephone bookings only, many of which will originate from homes whilst they will also often include return trips from the central area which may or may not be booked at time of outward journey. Many such trips will also be using free phones located at key supermarkets and some other key centres such as the hospital, often outside the main central area. More recently people are tending to book vehicles using mobile phones, with 'apps' starting to see much more use in the last year or so.

Night private hire trips are focussed on a key pick-up point encouraged at the Rickmansworth Road roundabout (the 2011 survey identified about 7% of observed passenger trips from this location). This may not, however, be a particularly good location for those with disabilities to get to.

At the present time there are a wide range of vehicles in the hackney carriage fleet – the kinds of vehicle available determine the service possible to those with a range of disabilities. Whilst some persons need wheel chair accessible (WAV) or mobility impaired accessible vehicles, other disabilities require different types of adaptation, such as for those with visual or auditory issues, who may find fully WAV style vehicles actually worsen their ability to use the service. The review of available vehicles is reported below.

Further, at the present time in Watford, the vast majority of drivers are able to drive either hackney carriages or private hire vehicles without distinction with all being able to drive private hire vehicles. This should mean a level playing field in terms of their training and experience towards the passenger, but can also widen the number of persons needing to be reviewed if a passenger reports an issue but failed to obtain the driver badge number.

Vehicle Types

Of the current hackney carriage fleet of 279 vehicles there are:

- 49 London style (fully wheel chair accessible)
- 26 other WAV style
- 93 people mover style
- 11 estate cars

Of the 26 other WAV style, there are some seven different makes at the present time with appropriate fitments to be counted as WAV:

- Mercedes Vito (12)
- Fiat Scudo (5)
- Mercedes Viano (4)
- Nissan Primastar (2)
- Hyundai i800 (1)
- Ford Tourneo (1)
- VW Transporter (1)

The total WAV fleet at this time is therefore 75 vehicles, or 27% of the fleet but it must be reiterated that all of these are within the hackney carriage fleet.

Of the 126 private hire vehicles:

- 78 are saloon
- 16 are estate
- 32 are MPV

Licensing advised us that none of the MPV style private hire vehicles are wheel chair accessible – even if the vehicle could be, none have the relevant adaptations fitted. As this is the case, the overall proportion of the licensed vehicle fleet which is WAV is therefore 19%.

Fleet ownership structure

Approximate information was provided to identify the current fleet structure for the licensed vehicle fleet. There are ten private hire operators at this point in time. Three are 'one-man' operations each with a single vehicle. There is one hackney carriage operation without a private hire operator licence, and one hackney carriage operation which has just gained a private hire licence but has no private hire vehicles allied as yet. There are two private hire companies who only operate as private hire (one being the largest operator in the area).

The hackney carriage only circuit is the next largest operator. There are four companies who operate a mixed fleet of hackney carriages and private hire vehicles – two of whom have London style WAV. The other two have MPV but it is not clear if any of these are WAV style.

Overall there are six companies / hackney operations with 19 or more vehicles, two with around 10 (although we are aware that one of these seems to be under-reported in terms of hackney carriages allied to them) and three one man band independents.

Around 40% of the hackney carriage fleet are allied to either the hackney carriage operation or private hire companies and therefore directly available by phone (we are aware that this figure is an under-estimate as many work for one operator and do not appear to have recorded this). Including in this total are 20 (7% of hcv total) London style and 41 MPV (15%) although it is assumed that none of these are WAV.

We were advised that any company without WAV style vehicles will have some agreement with a driver with a WAV to be able to provide for any person calling requiring such a vehicle – best practise. From the information we have, this would definitely apply to the two private hire only operators (one of whom is the largest operator in the area), and may apply to one of the mixed fleet operators who have MPV but which are not WAV.

3. Results from Mystery Shopping surveys

3.1 Methodology

In order to meet Watford Borough Council's objectives, the following methodology was adopted:

- A telephone inception meeting to confirm outline details and methodology
- Collation of background information to set the context in which the mystery shopping exercise was undertaken (Chapters 1 and 2 above).
- A visit to Watford to meet key stakeholders and identify potential mystery shoppers
- Two tranches of 13 mystery shopper trips including an interim report after Tranche 1, split between wheelchair users, ambulant disabled, deaf and hearing impaired, blind and visually impaired and those with learning difficulties (this chapter)
- Production of this Final Report summarising results and providing practical recommendations

3.2 Contact with stakeholders

Face to face discussions have been held with:

- Members and associates of Disability Watford
- Administrators and reception staff at Watford General Hospital
- Direct face to face interviews including some who were recruited to undertake mystery shopping taxi trips with disabled people in Watford Town Centre
- Staff at Watford Junction and Watford Underground Station
- Staff at supermarkets and other key venues such as the Central Library and Museum

In addition contact was made with staff or users of:

- Disability Watford
- PHAB Watford
- Mencap
- Drums Day Centre
- Watford Social Centre for the Blind

3.3 Mystery Shopping Trips

During the period early March to late April the following trips were carried out on a mystery shopping basis:

	6 th – 14 th March	16 th – 28 th April
Wheelchair users	5	6
Ambulant disabled	2	3
Deaf	2	1
Blind	2	2
Learning disabilities	2	1

Participants recorded details of pick up and drop off points, the type of vehicle as well as qualitative aspects of the trip. A copy of the form used is included at Appendix 1 together with a summary of each trip made.

Although the majority of trips were made by hackney carriages, some were booked by telephone. Where a wheelchair accessible vehicle was required all vehicles were hackney carriages but on some occasions the disabled passenger preferred a saloon type vehicle. For journeys in saloon vehicles it was not always possible to ascertain whether the status of the trip was by hackney carriage or private hire.

3.4 The results

Booking and hailing

All the wheelchair users, two of the ambulant disabled and three of the blind passengers (one travelling with a guide dog) needed an accessible vehicle. This requirement resulted in longer waits on average ranging from 5 minutes (at the Central rank) to over 50 minutes at the hospital. For example, at the hospital three patients who also used the courtesy phone to book after the mystery shopper made their booking - but were able to use saloon vehicles were collected before the mystery shopper's wheelchair accessible taxi. In other cases (for example at the library) there were no accessible taxis available for "at least two hours" and our mystery shopper agreed (and was able) to transfer to a saloon albeit with some pain and difficulty.

"We used the Freephone in the hospital reception but they said they didn't have any accessible taxis in their company. They were apologetic but it didn't help us and if we hadn't had some other taxi company numbers we'd have been completely stuck."

One of the difficulties with a mixed hackney fleet is that bookings need to specify the need for a wheelchair accessible taxi and this allows for the possibility of discrimination. This is hard to prove but one of the mystery shoppers who phoned and was told none was available called back five minutes afterwards requesting a 'taxi which would take a buggy' and a wheelchair accessible taxi turned up almost immediately.

"We were resigned to booking a saloon and collapsing the wheelchair but then a London type cab turned up immediately after they said they didn't have one."

Other wheelchair users found it embarrassing at the Station rank when drivers had loud discussions about who would take the wheelchair booking.

"There was a bit of a conflagration about who would pull out of the queue to take me especially when I said where I was going which was only a short trip away."

Attempts were also made by two wheelchair users and one person with a guide dog to hail from the street. One taxi stopped for the wheelchair user (after five had failed to stop) but none stopped for the other wheelchair user (passed by four taxis during a 1 hour period at The Crescent/Exchange Road) or the person with the guide dog (waiting with companion for half an hour and passed by three accessible and two saloon taxis).

Ranks

The location of ranks in Watford was found to be convenient with the exception of the layout at Watford Junction Station and the provision for taxi pick-up within the Hospital site.

At the Station, the signage directs wheelchair users to the main rank to the right of the entrance (as you leave the station). However, there is inadequate room for loading wheelchairs at this location and wheelchair passengers are further directed to a disabled loading point. This represents an additional effort by the wheelchair user especially when travelling alone which added to the reluctance of some drivers to lose their place in the queue is not a welcoming experience especially to first time visitors to Watford.

"I went across to the head of the rank but the first three were saloons. Then there were arguments between the drivers about who was going to take me which made me feel bad. Then I was told to go over to the other side of the station and wait. I didn't know where to go but finally found a marking on the road where I waited for another 5 minutes. The camber to this new space was steep and when the driver arrived he seemed cross."

At the hospital there is a lot of congestion and at the main entrance ambulances take up space in the reception area resulting in some wheelchair users needing to cross the road to reach the taxi parking place. One driver was moved on by security before the passenger could get to the parking place and another found the ramp too steep in the absence of access to a kerb.

Loading, seat belts and wheelchair securing

One driver of a wheel chair accessible vehicle did not have a ramp available. Another parked so that the swivel seat required for an ambulant disabled passenger could only be accessed from the road.

Of the 11 wheelchair users two were properly secured for both wheelchair and passenger.

One driver asked the wheelchair user if she wanted to be secured in a tone of voice implying it would be a nuisance if she did. Another driver claimed the wheelchair was "too big" to be secured.

"He said my wheelchair was too big to be strapped down – but I had already had this done OK in a similar taxi earlier in the day. He then said 'don't worry I'll drive slowly' but as we turned the corner my friend had to hang on to stop my leg banging against the seat."

Three drivers did not secure the wheelchair properly and did not secure the passengers' seat belts at all. One driver bumped the passenger's leg against the door whilst loading.

None of the drivers checked that passengers were using their seat belts (this is not to imply they should have done so but perhaps something to expect especially in the case of the person with learning difficulties).

"I was left to travel sideways not correctly strapped in – I was travelling with a child also not strapped in until I asked."

There were also some problems with ambulant disabled passengers in terms of not offering the choice of a swivel seat where one existed or failing to move the front seat of a saloon car forwards or backwards to give more room. There were also problems in helping with luggage and storage of crutches or walkers.

"He made no attempt to help put my sticks in the boot or hand them out when we arrived. He just sat there."

Customer Care

There were some very good reports of excellent customer care for all types of disabled customers but sadly these were the minority.

Both the deaf passengers and those with learning difficulties carried a note giving the name of their destination. In four out of the five cases the driver did not attempt to communicate with them during the journey although the fifth driver was excellent and returned money to the passenger with learning difficulties who had the wrong fare. One passenger had Tourette's syndrome and was told by the driver to 'be quiet'. Others reported language difficulties.

"I was taken to the theatre when I had said the museum but the driver didn't seem to understand me and I certainly didn't understand him either."

For those requiring the accessible vehicles, the general impression was of reluctance by drivers although there were exceptions with two drivers being very helpful in carrying luggage and giving onward directions within the pedestrian area.

"When I approached the taxi driver, he seemed really (annoyed) and got the ramps out with a lot of huffing and puffing and never said a word to me. When someone acts like that it's embarrassing ...awkward to be loaded especially as he has to bend down close to you to anchor the chair."

Other drivers were unprofessional – for example, grumbling about the foolishness of the Council's traffic management, swearing at other drivers. Two trips resulted in people being dropped at the wrong place.

"Even when he took the booking, the driver said he was late for his next booking and when we got near the shopping centre he dropped me off two streets away because he said it was too congested."

"The driver didn't know the way and got lost - in the end I used my sat-nav to help him but he didn't take anything off the meter."

There were clearly issues with guide dogs – one accessible taxi had an old blanket apparently permanently draped across the back seat on the grounds "in case a dog gets hairs on the seat."

"In spite of it being illegal - I've come to know that guide dogs are not welcome by many of the Watford taxi drivers – over the years I've had excuses such as diabetes, asthma and allergy."

Charging

Most drivers charged the amount on the meter but in one case there was already £4 on the clock when the taxi arrived (in Clarendon Road) and in another case the meter was not turned off until the wheelchair user was unloaded (at the Council Offices).

One driver gave insufficient change – apologising when this was pointed out – so there is no way of knowing if this was a genuine mistake.

Another driver appeared to use a longer than necessary route (from the town centre to the football ground via Whippendale Road) but this was said to be due to road works.

Finally there were two instances of drivers not having any change resulting in the passenger paying more.

"The fare was £8 and I would've given a £1 tip but I didn't want to give £2 but I ended up having to because he said he didn't have any change and there was nowhere at the cemetery to get any."

Conclusion

The mystery shopping exercises have shown that there are a number of problems with only two out of 26 trips being completely satisfactory.

On the other hand most drivers knew the routes. Most charges were correct. There were also some very good examples of helpfulness in relation to customer care.

The biggest problems relate to travel by wheelchair users. There was an alarming record of poor or non-existent securing practice not to mention reluctance by many drivers to carry wheelchair passengers. The same applies to people travelling with guide dogs.

Communication skills are also lacking largely due to lack of appropriate knowledge, embarrassment or awkwardness rather than deliberate rudeness.

4. Recommendations

Introduction

Our research into the experiences of disabled taxi users has been undertaken in over twenty towns and cities some with a hundred percent wheelchair vehicles and some with mixed fleets.

Although the focus of this exercise was on the customer experience, it is clear from the point of view of some in the taxi trade that disabled passengers are perceived as representing additional challenges. Disabled taxi users often need extra help with loading and securing. Others may have different communication needs or tip less due to low incomes. Added to this, some drivers may have cultural or religious beliefs about disability which lead to discrimination.

Nevertheless, there can be no excuses for discrimination and poor service such as the mystery shopping exercise in Watford has shown.

Recommendation 1: Training

It is clear that drivers need training in both disability awareness and practical skills in loading and passenger handling in general. This should include offering appropriate help such as luggage storage and communication. Being more aware and understanding the vulnerability of some disabled people is a key factor in improving service standards.

There are some excellent training courses on offer in terms of disability awareness including from Disability Watford. However, it is also recommended that these incorporate participation from drivers or others knowledgeable about the trade, practical demonstrations and frank discussions about real and perceived problems associated with the work. The training should also show evidence of the economic benefits of good service to disabled passengers including reducing potential for unmet demand and opportunities for contracts.

The training should be accredited and marketed as an essential aspect of professional taxi service provision. It would be ideal if hackney carriage and private hire drivers as well as operators enrol.

Recommendation 2: Guidance for disabled taxi users

One of the ways to improve taxi services is to provide good information to customers. During the research we found a gap in such provision and a number of misunderstandings by users. For example, some of the mystery shoppers thought that wheelchair accessible hackney carriages charged higher fares than saloon hackneys. Another issue was wheelchair size with guidance needed about which sizes and types would be acceptable for use in taxis.

The existence of swivel seats in some vehicles was also a feature of which most were unaware and which would have been helpful especially for ambulant disabled passengers.

Recommendation 3: Ranks and Drop off points

The mystery shoppers experience a range of problems with the placement of ranks and taxi pick-up points especially (as described above) at the station and the hospital. We understand that there are new plans for the layout of the hospital site so the Council have an opportunity to ensure that the needs of disabled taxi users are properly considered within the planning considerations for the revised site.

Similarly there should be a better arrangement at Watford Junction station – at the very least signing to the disabled pick up point although this would not solve the initial problem of needing to hail from the main rank and then moving over to the other side for loading. The Council need to continue working with those responsible for the design and operation of the station rank and environment to see significant improvement.

On a broader basis it would be useful for an audit of all ranks and private hire office parking arrangements to be carried out bearing in mind the issue of wheelchair accessible vehicle and saloon car front seat left side loading being essential.

Recommendation 4: Stakeholder consultation and monitoring

The mystery shopping exercise has been modest with only 26 trips spread across all disabilities. However, contact has been made with stakeholder organisations representing disabled people and also staff of key public venues. The key message from such organisations especially those representing disabled people is that there needs to be more discussion and ongoing monitoring by disabled taxi users themselves.

Appendix A – Summary of Mystery Shopping Trips and questionnaire schedule

Date	Start	End	Type	Waiting time	Loading	Route	Charge	Customer Care	Other problem
6/3	High St	Watford Jn Station	WAV	10 min	X	✓	✓	x	Yes
6/3	Watford Met Station	Clarendon Rd	WAV	30 min	X	✓	x	x	No
6/3	Rickmansworth Rd	Watford General Hospital	WAV	20 min	x	✓	✓	x	Yes
6/3	Watford Jn Station	Hospice	WAV	15 min	x	✓	x	✓	Yes
7/3	Exchange Rd	Bushey Station	Saloon	40 min	x	✓	✓	x	Yes
8/3	High Street	Football Ground	WAV	5 min	x	x	✓	✓	Yes
12/3	DWP Neasden Lane	Bushey	WAV	2 min	✓	✓	✓	✓	No
12/3	Watford General Hospital	High Street	WAV	50 min	x	✓	x	x	No
13/3	Albert Road	Bushey Grove	WAV	30 min	x	✓	✓	x	No
13/3	Rickmansworth Rd	Century Park	WAV	20 min	x	✓	✓	x	Yes
14/3	Watford Jn Station	George St	WAV	10 min	x	✓	✓	x	Yes
14/3	Beecham Grove	Watford Jn Station	Saloon	40 min	x	✓	✓	x	Yes
14/3	Library	Stratford Rd	Saloon	3 min	✓	✓	✓	✓	No
16/4	Watford United Football Ground	Watford General Hospital	Saloon	10 min flagged down	✓	✓	✓	✓	Yes
16/4	Watford Jn Station	Watford General Hospital	WAV	0 mins At rank	x	✓	✓	X	Yes
18/4	Watford General Hospital	INTU shopping centre	Saloon (Toyota)	40 mins	x	✓	✓	X	Y
18/4	Rickmansworth Rd	Watford Jn Station	WAV	50 mins	✓	✓	x	X	Yes
21/4	Central rank	Vicarage Rd Cemetery	WAV (LTI)	0 mins	✓	✓	✓	X	Yes
21/4	Cassiobury Park	Museum	WAV	5 mins	x	x	x	X	Yes
25/4	Rickmansworth Rd	Premier Inn	WAV	35mins	x	✓	✓	X	Yes
24/4	Watford Business Park	Watford Jn Station	WAV	50 mins	x	✓		✓	Yes
24/4	Watford General Hospital	Bushey Station	Saloon	10 mins	x	✓	✓	✓	No
25/4	Watford Jn Station	Derby Rd Baptist Church	Saloon	0 mins	x	✓	✓	x	Yes
28/4	Bell pub	Tolpits Business Park	Saloon	0 mins	✓	✓	✓	✓	No
28/4	Langleybury Farm	Cassiobury Park Cafe	Saloon	5 mins –	✓	✓	✓	✓	Yes
29/4	High Street	County Court	Saloon	10 mins	✓	✓	✓	x	Yes

Key

Wheelchair user (11)	Ambulant disabled (5)	Deaf (3)	Blind (4)	Learning difficulties (2) or mental illness (1)
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Watford Taxi User Research – “Mystery Shopping” exercise

Thank you for your offer to help with this study which is to understand more about the experience of disabled people (especially wheelchair users) in using taxis in Watford. We are especially interested in what happens if you hail a taxi from a rank (hackney carriage) rather than pre-booked (private hire).

The plan is for you to make a taxi journey in the Watford area and then tell us how they got on via a short questionnaire or telephone interview. It is important that you do not tell the driver about the survey as that could bias the results. We would then ask you to complete the form below describing your experience (plus the general questionnaire also below). The results will be anonymous at the individual level. We need to carry out this research by the end of April.

Kristine Beuret OBE, Director,
Social Research Associates
07771 661156 or Freephone number 0800 0854414

Report Form (fill in one for each trip and tick the answers that apply)

1. Starting point

Give details	
Rank (give street name)	
Other location (give details)	
Refused to accept booking (give more details in box 5 below)	

2. End point

Give details	
Rank (give street name)	
Other location (give details)	

3. Type of taxi

3(a) Type of booking		3(b) Type of vehicle			
Hackney (legal to hire from street). In Watford some of these are purpose built (e.g. wheelchair accessible)	Private Hire (these are prebooked)	Traditional black cab (made by LTI)	Other purpose built wheelchair accessible make (specify if possible)	Saloon car type	Don't know

4. Quality of trip

	Yes	No	Comments
Did you have any problems booking or finding a taxi			
Did the driver provide good customer care?			
Was the type of vehicle suitable for your trip			
Did the driver know the way?			
Was the charge correct?			

5. Any other comments you would like to make about your trip?

Q6 Do any of these apply to you? (Indicate as many as apply)	I need a wheel chair accessible vehicle	1
	I need an adapted vehicle, but not wheel chair accessible	2
Other comments – write in		

Q7a Have you ever given up waiting for a hackney carriage at a rank in Watford?	Yes 1	No 2
Q7b Have you ever given up when trying to hail a taxi in Watford	Yes 1	No 2
Q7c If Yes to a or b above – please write in where and more details		

Q8 Do you have regular access to a car?	Yes 1	No 2
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Q9 Do you live in the area?	Yes 1	No 2
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Q10 Sex	Male 1	Female 2
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Q11 Age	Under 30 1	31 – 55 2	Over 55 3
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Q12a Nature of disability	Ambulant 1	Visual 2	Aural 3	Cognitive 4	Other 5
Q12b	Are you travelling with a child/buggy			Yes	No