

Dorset Disability Equality Forum Formal Consultation Response on Dorset Council's Taxi Policy - 13th September 2021

Dorset Disability Equality Forum is a group of statutory, community and voluntary sector representatives and lay members with lived experience of physical and learning disabilities, mental health conditions, neurodiversity and sensory impairments and long-term health conditions and their carers. We are committed to raising the profile of and progressing disability issues in Dorset. We adopt the Social Model of Disability which recognises the barriers which are created by society and how these interact with our conditions to disable us. We offer advice and information on disability issues to organisations and are community-led, using lived experience as a foundation stone in improving equality for the disabled community. We believe in creating a supportive and constructively challenging environment in which the services we, as disabled people, interact with can enhance their provision.

We have been delighted to be consulted by Dorset Council on the review of their Taxi Policy for January 2022 onwards and share with them the below priorities as voiced by the disabled community in Dorset.

- Expectations
- Training for drivers and operators
- Accessibility packs for all vehicles
- Booking
- Boarding
- Journey
- Getting out the taxi
- Alerting if something goes wrong
- Next steps

Expectations

Every customer, their friends and family, carers, personal assistants and travel companions, should be treated with courtesy and recognition of the diversity of conditions and impairments experienced and the impacts of these. This should be done from the perspective of the Social Model of Disability, which recognises that people are disabled by their environments, in terms of the physical, social and attitudinal barriers which are created by a society which fails to plan for and adapt to the diversity of experiences of individuals and therefore, the duty that services have to remove, as far as possible, those barriers. Everyone should be treated with recognition that they are unique, without assumptions and a person-centred approach taken. Everyone involved in the customers' journey, from the council licensing and inspecting operators, booking staff and drivers, should be aware of and sensitive to individuals and their supporters' needs, without depriving customers of their independence. Time and help should be

given freely and offered when appropriate, no-one should be disadvantaged nor left to struggle and aids and adaptations (including assistance or therapy dogs) accommodated willingly and without question.

Customers and their supporters are not defined by their experiences of disability and should not face intrusive or inappropriate questions or comments.

All information, signage and language used by employees of Dorset Council and taxi operators at all stages must be fully inclusive and appreciate the diversity of customers' experiences, across all 9 protected characteristics and the additional characteristics adopted by Dorset Council. This includes disability, gender identity and sexual and romantic identities and it is expected that everyone will feel taxi operators and transport are a safe space for them. Language should be gender neutral, not make assumptions, welcoming and inclusive of people and provide support whenever needed to maintain the safety of people both within and outside the taxi (e.g. as a place of solace and support if at risk of or under threat of physical or verbal harm).

Drivers must take all assistance and therapy dogs unless they have a medical exemption certificate. If a driver has a medical exemption certificate, this should be advised at the point of booking and an alternative be explored if necessary. All customers should be able to decide how and where their dog travels with them.

All taxi operators and Dorset Council as the licensing authority, should offer and promote a transparent and accessible feedback and complaints mechanism. The standards of behaviour and treatment customers should rightly expect should be advertised via whatever booking system they use, whether this by telephone, app, website etc and in the vehicles themselves. This information should be available in a variety of different formats, to be fully inclusive of people who may have communication barriers. Dorset Council should seek to offer a variety of mechanisms which take account of people's preferences and access issues, including those who are not digitally connected and those who need facilitated access. Feedback should be proactively sought via the same mechanism as is used to booked a journey and the council, as the licensing authority, should seek to engage with a range of different community organisations representing diverse experiences, such as Dorset Disability Equality Forum, Help and Kindness, LGBT+ Voices Dorset Forum, Dorset Race Equality Council, Citizens Advice Central Dorset and LGBT+ Dorset Equality Network to name but a few.

Standardisation of funding to contracted taxi operators should apply equally from the council. Some members have reported that one firm gives a percentage to drivers, with the back office keeping a percentage, while another firm gives all the funding to their drivers. This is seen as leading to an enhanced offer from the drivers who are properly invested in.

Training

The following is not an exhaustive list but represents a guide to a breadth of training that should be rolled out as standard, before a license is granted to either an operator or driver and repeatedly at least every renewal.

1. Blind/Deaf awareness.
2. [e-LfH Hub](#) - preferred training from Public Health England for Suicide Prevention
3. <https://www.zerosuicidealliance.com/training> - this could be done in addition to the above e-LfH Hub training but is not enough as a standalone module, it would still be great if *everyone* did this
4. Sunflower Lanyard Scheme and its meaning for hidden disabilities, use of additional cards to add to the lanyard for specific barriers e.g. Autism and how people can help
5. Autistic Spectrum Conditions and the communication difficulties people on the spectrum may have
6. Service dogs - how to recognise them and what the rules are around them
7. What to do if someone is having a panic attack
8. How to talk to someone in distress/extreme distress
9. Visual Impairment Awareness Training is needed for all drivers & staff taking the bookings
10. Mental Health First Aid training dorsetmind.uk/product/mental-health-first-aid-adult-aug-eve-21/
11. Driver training to pick up, check and effectively use accessibility information which has been collected at the point of booking
12. Understanding of people's different needs and that it may not be possible to "just drop someone off". All passengers and their supporters must be treated with courtesy and drivers' lack of understanding not impact on them
13. Help the person to feel safe, both the disabled person and the people supporting them
14. Knowledge of the area, barriers and how passengers can be best supported in terms of drop-off and pick-up, not just the quickest routes there
15. Check-in with the passenger at the start of the journey, to either ask if or advise what to do if they need help, this needs to be routinised

Accessibility packs for all vehicles

This list does not represent a conclusive list of all aids/adaptations that every disabled person will need or that taxis should carry, however, it does represent a starting point that will provide a basic offer to some within the disabled community to improve their access. The kit needs to be advertised at the time the service is booked, via whatever method that may be and should be confirmed in the booking confirmation. The availability of the kit should be reiterated at all points, e.g. booking, pick-up, on the journey and at drop-off. Whether a person requires the kit should be asked in a sensitive way and in such a way that no response is required from the individual but that enables them to change their mind at any point through their interaction or journey. The call handler, app and driver should emphasise it is available, give examples and encourage its use at any and all points on the person's journey. Smaller items from the kit should be readily accessible and visible to the passenger, in a safe and uncluttered place within the taxi, so they can self-service.

1. A Cushion
2. A way of alerting the driver to mental needs as well as physical. perhaps something as simple as a button to press that lights up a box on the parcel shelf, so the taxi driver can see someone is in distress mentally. This could also be a pack of green cards, amber cards and red cards in the back too that the passenger can pick to indicate to the driver - this could mean different things from don't talk to me, to i need help, to everything's fine - drivers must be trained to ask appropriate and sensitive questions and engage with the passenger
3. Car transfer bar https://www.amazon.co.uk/HandyBar-091032705-Car-Transfer-Bar/dp/B00HVVAGMI/ref=asc_df_B00HVVAGMI/?tag=googshopuk-21&linkCode=df0&hvadid=309808827530&hvpos=&hvnetw=g&hvrnd=8061161503993354275&hvpon=&hvptwo=&hvqmt=&hvdev=c&hvdvcmdl=&hvlocint=&hvlocphy=1006634&hvtargid=pla-613850967072&psc=1
4. Putnams magic cushion (they self inflate so can be compressed for storage)
5. Back Friend - foldable and adjustable portable seat that can be placed onto virtually any seat
6. Stim toys in the back of the taxi

Booking

When booking a journey, whether by phone, online or app, a checklist/series of questions should be asked to understand and be able to support the passenger's needs as well as possible. It is important this is not left until the driver picks up, so they have all the correct information, are able to support as needed and the vehicle is suitable for the passenger to proceed with their journey without delay/problem.

The driver must pick up this information and reliably use it. See suggestions under 'Next Steps'. Collection of this information needs to be routinised by call handlers and made easily accessible whether booking online or via an app. The "spiel" must not be rushed through but pride incited in call handlers and drivers so they feel upskilled and positive about giving the service. All operators and drivers should be aware of and sensitive to the diversity of conditions people experience and able to respond appropriate to these.

It may not always be appropriate for the passenger to be interacted with directly - they may be uncomfortable or unable to communicate independently. The option to record an alternative contact should be facilitated via all booking methods and utilised if information is needed to be communicated, such as if the taxi is going to be late. This may apply for example in cases where the passenger has dementia or learning disabilities.

A much wider fleet of accessible vehicles is needed, which can operate across all times of day and night, undisrupted by contracts such as for schools. Disabled people are engaged in all aspects of everyday life and must not be limited to (discriminated against) on what times they are "allowed" to travel because of these factors. People are often left stranded, outside in the cold and wet, unable to continue their journey, leaving them vulnerable in a multitude of ways.

Return journeys should be bookable at the point of booking or taking the outward journey, to give reassurance that the person can get back at their chosen time and complete their journey.

Taxis must run punctually and should reasonably be expected to arrive within five minutes of their booked time, especially if it has been pre-ordered and furthermore, if it is operating under contract from the council. Unreliability can cause additional problems for passengers with additional needs and carers or supporters who have to deal with high levels of anxiety, distress and/or uncertainty. Contact via the booking method should be routinised if there are any delays or anticipated issues with providing the booked service.

Different payment methods, including cash, should be available as standard, to protect disabled people from potential vulnerabilities associated with different payment types, e.g. sharing card details. The cost of the journey should be made clear at time of booking so clients can have the exact amount of cash ready, if that is the desired payment method.

Booking methods, whether by phone, online or app, must effectively convey all requirements and drivers follows through on these.

Boarding

All passengers should reasonably expect to enter a freshly cleaned and safe vehicle, including having interior and exterior door handles and frames wiped down between bookings.

Drivers must not refuse, as often happens, to take people with particular conditions, which results in high levels of distress and the person being stranded. All drivers should willingly and freely assist, for example by opening car doors and dropping passengers off where it is safe, not only where it is convenient for the driver.

Journey

Drivers should be confident not only of the quickest routes but of the context of a route, to inspire passengers and reduce their anxiety.

Space should be respected, as well as preferences to not communicate or ways of communicating.

Communication should be compassionate and genuine, without being patronising or condescending.

Getting out the taxi

People may need physical and emotional support getting in and out of taxis and making sure they get to where they need to go.

Drop offs should be in a suitable place and the passenger may need taking into the building and/or be handed over to someone else.

Drivers should make every effort to drop the client off as near to the venue entrance as possible & they should not be dropped off where a road needs to be crossed.

Drivers should be sensitive to people's speed and not show any impatience.

If the passenger is visually impaired, drivers should give guidance to them as to exactly where they are positioned so that they can be aware of their surroundings.

Next steps

Dorset Disability Equality Forum requests that Dorset Council work with us, as representatives of the disabled community and the statutory, community and voluntary sectors working with disabled people, to co-produce

- An accessibility app: this will allow disabled passengers and their carers to indicate their needs in advance of their journey and receive assurance and ensure accountability that their needs will be met. Examples of prototypes that could be explored include the Welcome app and the Transreport app. We would

like to see Dorset Council develop or procure an app designed with the disabled community to enable them to access transport that meets their needs

- An accreditation scheme for all taxi operators in the Dorset Council area, based on criteria to achieve and a consumer rating system. The criteria should be co-produced with the disabled community and banded, bronze, silver and gold, to inspire competition between operators and enable disabled customers and their carers to exercise choice when planning and booking their journeys. We would like to see this be a peer tested/peer review scheme developed in collaboration between Dorset Disability Equality Forum and Dorset Council