

MIDDLESBROUGH COUNCIL

COMMITTEE REPORT

LICENSING COMMITTEE

24 AUGUST 2026

REPORT OF DIRECTOR OF REGENERATION AND HOUSING

REQUEST FOR DELEGATED AUTHORITY FOR GRANT OF PRIVATE HIRE/HACKNEY CARRIAGE VEHICLE LICENCE WHEELCHAIR ACCESSIBLE VEHICLES - REF: 25/26

PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

The purpose of this report is to seek Members' approval to delegate authority to Licensing Officers to determine applications for exemptions from the Council's vehicle age policy in respect of wheelchair accessible hackney carriage and private hire vehicles, where such applications fall outside the Council's current policy requirements.

BACKGROUND

Members are reminded that the Council's current Hackney Carriage and Private Hire Licensing Policy, implemented on 1 March 2022, limits the number of licensed saloon-type private hire vehicles to 190. However, in recognition of the need to promote accessible transport provision, no numerical restrictions are placed on the licensing of wheelchair accessible vehicles (WAVs), subject to the vehicle meeting the following requirement:

"The vehicle shall accommodate a passenger with a disability confined to a wheelchair and shall be either purpose built or converted prior to its first registration and have as a minimum inspection standard, the Vehicle Certification Agency Ministers Approval Certificate for a Low Volume Motor Vehicle or European Small Series Type Approval."

The above requirement has been in place since approximately 2001 and was reviewed as part of the wider consultation undertaken prior to the implementation of the current policy in March 2022.

Members will appreciate that the purpose of setting standards and requirements for licensed hackney carriage and private hire vehicles is to ensure that vehicles used to transport fare-paying passengers are safe, suitable and maintained to a high standard.

In respect of wheelchair accessible vehicles, the requirement for Vehicle Certification Agency (VCA) approval ensures that such vehicles meet nationally recognised safety standards for the transport of wheelchair users and ambulant passengers.

Wheelchair accessible vehicles approved under a national type approval scheme will have satisfied relevant safety standards, including strength testing of key vehicle components, seat fixings and wheelchair restraint and anchorage systems. Applicants seeking to licence a wheelchair accessible vehicle that has been converted prior to first registration must therefore provide an EC Certificate of Conformity for Completed Vehicles approved by the Vehicle Certification Agency.

Consequently, the purchase and maintenance costs associated with wheelchair accessible vehicles are significantly higher than those of standard saloon vehicles.

CURRENT VEHICLE AGE POLICY

The Council's current policy for the licensing of private hire and hackney carriage vehicles states:

"Vehicles in respect of new and replacement applications must be no more than five years of age from the date of first registration on the date of the initial application. The vehicle must be licensed within 28 days of the initial application.

The licence of any vehicle will terminate not more than ten years from the date of first registration. This will be extended to 12 years for London Style Cabs and side-loading wheelchair accessible vehicles approved by the Council."

The current age policy was introduced to ensure that licensed vehicles remain safe, reliable and of a suitable standard for public use.

EUROPEAN EMISSIONS STANDARDS

In recent years, many Local Authorities have moved away from vehicle age restrictions and have instead adopted vehicle emissions standards as a means of regulating licensed hackney carriage and private hire vehicles.

The current European emissions standards applicable to passenger vehicles are:

- Euro 1 – mandatory from 1993
- Euro 2 – mandatory from 1997
- Euro 3 – mandatory from 2001
- Euro 4 – mandatory from 2006

- Euro 5 – mandatory from 2011
- Euro 6 – mandatory from 2015

The vast majority of Local Authorities across the North-East have now adopted the Euro 6 emissions standard as part of their licensing policies.

TAXI AND PRIVATE HIRE VEHICLE LICENSING BEST PRACTICE GUIDANCE (NOVEMBER 2023)

The Department for Transport's Taxi and Private Hire Vehicle Licensing Best Practice Guidance (November 2023) states:

"8.4 Licensing authorities should not impose age limits for the licensing of vehicles; instead they should consider more targeted requirements to meet their policy objectives on emissions, safety rating and increasing wheelchair accessible provision where this is low."

The guidance also recognises the importance of wheelchair accessible vehicles in ensuring inclusivity within taxi and private hire services and states:

" 8.9 Wheelchair accessible vehicles are essential for wheelchair users who are unable to transfer from their wheelchair to the vehicle, or who prefer to travel in their wheelchair."

The guidance further recommends that licensing authorities understand local demand for wheelchair accessible vehicles and consider measures to incentivise their provision where demand is not being met. Suggested measures include licence fee rebates, priority access arrangements, relaxation of licensing requirements where appropriate, and other incentives designed to increase the availability of wheelchair accessible vehicles.

LOCAL AUTHORITY APPROACHES

A number of Local Authorities across the North-East have reviewed their taxi licensing policies to incentivise the licensing and retention of wheelchair accessible vehicles.

For example, Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council, which has adopted Euro 6 emissions standards, has exempted wheelchair accessible vehicles from those requirements due to the relatively low number of such vehicles available within its licensed fleet.

Similar approaches have been adopted by both Durham County Council and Darlington Borough Council in order to support and maintain wheelchair accessible transport provision.

INFORMATION

Officers are aware that there has been a significant decline in the number of wheelchair accessible private hire and hackney carriage vehicles licensed by Middlesbrough Council since 2020, with proprietors regularly citing the significantly higher purchase and operating costs associated with these vehicles as a contributing factor.

In 2020 there were approximately 150 licensed wheelchair accessible private hire and hackney carriage vehicles operating within the Middlesbrough licensed fleet.

The Council currently licenses 32 wheelchair accessible vehicles, comprising:

- 14 larger side-loading vehicles; and
- 18 smaller rear and side-loading vehicles.

A recent review of licensed wheelchair accessible vehicles has identified that several vehicles will reach the Council's maximum permitted age within the next 12 months. In line with the current policy, these vehicles will not be eligible for licence renewal and will therefore be removed from the licensed fleet.

Without suitable replacement vehicles being introduced, this is likely to have a significant impact on the availability of wheelchair accessible transport services within Middlesbrough.

Officers will be considering a wider review of the Council's taxi licensing policies later this year. As part of that review, consideration will be given to replacing vehicle age limits with emissions-based requirements, in line with the approach adopted by many neighbouring authorities and national best practice guidance.

Officers are also considering the introduction of specific exemptions and incentives for wheelchair accessible vehicles as a means of supporting and increasing their availability within the licensed fleet.

Members recently considered an application relating to a licensed wheelchair accessible vehicle that had reached the Council's maximum vehicle age limit and would otherwise have been removed from the licensed fleet.

Having considered the circumstances of the case and the potential impact on wheelchair accessible transport provision, Members exercised their discretion and granted a one-year extension to the vehicle licence.

To ensure the continued safety and suitability of the vehicle, Members attached a condition requiring the proprietor to present the vehicle for three compliance inspections during the 12-month extension period.

Officers are aware that there are other proprietors who are considering similar applications may arise before the wider policy review has been concluded. In such circumstances, requiring every application to be referred to Committee may result in unnecessary delays and administrative burden.

Officers therefore recommend that delegated authority be granted to Licensing Officers to determine applications for exemptions from the Council's vehicle age policy where the application relates to a wheelchair accessible hackney carriage or private hire vehicle and where officers are satisfied that:

- the vehicle remains safe and mechanically fit for purpose;

- the vehicle passes any additional compliance inspections required by the Council;
- enhanced testing requirements are imposed where considered necessary; and
- the exemption would support the continued availability of wheelchair accessible transport within Middlesbrough.

RECOMMENDATION

Members are requested to approve the delegation of authority to Licensing Officers to determine applications for exemptions from the Council's vehicle age policy in respect of wheelchair accessible hackney carriage and private hire vehicles, where such applications fall outside existing policy requirements.

This would allow applications to be considered on a case-by-case basis, subject to enhanced testing and safety requirements, whilst helping to maintain the availability of wheelchair accessible vehicles within the licensed fleet pending the outcome of the wider taxi licensing policy review.

The proposed delegation would provide greater flexibility in responding to the declining number of wheelchair accessible vehicles within Middlesbrough, support the continued provision of accessible transport services for disabled passengers, and ensure that public safety remains paramount through the application of robust inspection and compliance requirements.