

TAXI VOUCHER SCHEME - REVIEW

1 SUMMARY

- 1.1 This report provides a summary of the performance of the Taxi Voucher Scheme during the first six months of operation.
- 1.2 The scheme is a Discretionary Service.

2 INTRODUCTION

- 2.1 The scheme was introduced on 1st April 2002 as a replacement for the Dial-a-ride service, to respond to the needs of special groups within the community who are unable to use conventional forms of public transport. It provides users with a number of vouchers, in £2.00 denominations, which can be surrendered as part or full payment for fares incurred whilst using Taxis licensed in the Rochford District.

- 2.2 The admission criteria for the scheme are:

Applicants must be 18 years of age or over.

Applicants must be resident in the Rochford District.

Applicant must be in receipt of at least one of the following:

- Attendance Allowance (higher level)
- Disability Living Allowance (mobility component)
- War Pension (mobility supplement)

or be blind or partially sighted.

Confirmation is required that the applicant is unable to use conventional forms of public transport and does not have a vehicle of their own.

- 2.3 Wheelchair users receive an additional voucher allocation of 50%.
- 2.4 Successful applicants pay a £5.00 registration fee.
- 2.5 A budget allocation of £33,000, plus a contribution from Essex County Council of £20,000, totalling £53,000 fund the scheme.
- 2.6 The Essex County Council contribution is subject to a minimum of there being 80 users and 4000 journeys per annum.
- 2.7 Members determine the amount of the quarterly voucher issue.

3 SCHEME USAGE

3.1 The number of voucher recipients has grown since the scheme's introduction, and is shown in the following table:

As at	Non-wheelchair users	Wheelchair users	Total Users	Increase
1 April 2002	93	23	116	
1 May 2002	157	36	193	77
1 June 2002	172	42	214	21
1 July 2002	191	49	240	26
1 August 2002	206	50	256	16
1 September 2002	214	52	266	10
1 October 2002	225	55	280	14

3.2 Vouchers are issued quarterly and are valid for three months. The total values of vouchers issued, at the time of preparation of this report, are as follows.

Quarter Commencing	Value per Non-Wheelchair user	Value per wheelchair user	Total Non-wheelchair user	Total wheelchair user	Total value
1 April 2002	£120	£180	£16,718.00	£ 5,908.00	£22,626.00
1 July 2002	£48	£72	£9,688.00	£3,552.00	£13,240.00
1 October 2002*	£48	£72	£10,800.00	£3,960.00	£14,760.00
		Total	£37,206.00	£13,420.00	£50,626.00

** The figures in this row represent the vouchers issued on 1 October 2002 only. Additional vouchers for new applicants will be issued in November and December.*

Members will of course note from the above table, that the total value of vouchers issued appears to leave little for distribution in the final quarter. However, not all vouchers are used within their expiry date, which allows the value of unused vouchers to be returned to the scheme, and current indications are that the impact on the Budget will be neutralised.

3.3 At the time of preparation of this report, vouchers to the value of £26,678 have been redeemed by the Taxis within the district. Although it is not possible to precisely determine the value of vouchers that have been redeemed from a particular issue, it is estimated that £800 of this figure is in respect of vouchers issued on 1 October 2002. Therefore the total value of vouchers redeemed for the period 1 April 2002 to 30

September 2002 is £25,878. This represents 48.8% of the available budget.

- 3.4 During the period 1 April 2002 to 30 September 2002, an estimated 4000 journeys have been recorded, analysed as follows:

Purpose

- Social (44%)
- Shopping (30%)
- Other/Personal Care (26%)

This represents an average of 14.29 journeys per user during the six month period with an average of £6.47 per journey.

4 USER SURVEY/COMMENTS

- 4.1 A Customer survey was carried out as part of this review. The survey was sent to the 197 sighted users of the scheme and the survey of the remaining 66 users, registered as blind or partially sighted, was conducted by telephone. In total 68% of users completed the survey. The full result of the survey as attached at Appendix One, the following being a brief summary.

The survey showed that the majority of users became aware of the scheme through the Council, the newspaper, taxi drivers and Dial-a-Ride.

Just over half of the respondents considered the current level of information about the scheme to be good or very good. However the wording of this question seems to have been confusing as to what was required.

Nearly 90% of the respondents were satisfied or very satisfied with the application process. With regard to the amount of vouchers received, some people clearly answered with regard to the first issue of vouchers, whilst others answered with regard to the current, much reduced issue. As would be expected the comments reflect a strong disappointment in the reduction of vouchers.

A very high percentage of users are pleased with the service received from the taxi companies and many of the comments reflect this. There is a high level of satisfaction with the scheme and in comparison to the Dial-a-Ride it comes out strongly as a change for the better.

The strongest suggestion for improvement, other than more vouchers, is that the users should have the envelopes to complete, this would save the drivers time and cut down their waiting time.

Although there are some who are not happy with the scheme, the results and many of the comments made reflect an improvement in the quality of life for the vast majority of users.

- 4.2 The Rochford and Rayleigh Citizens Advice Bureau have commented on the effect of the scheme to their clients, and have requested that the admission criteria be reviewed. A copy of their letter is attached at appendix Two.
- 4.3 A number of enquiries and applications have been received from people with restricted mobility, but who do not qualify for the scheme because they are not in receipt of or do not qualify for one of the prescribed benefits.
- 4.4 A number of previous Dial-a-Ride users who used the Dial-a-Ride service extensively, and who qualify for the Taxi Voucher Scheme, have commented that the number of vouchers is insufficient to meet their needs. There have also been a number of comments from previous Dial-a-Ride users who do not qualify for the Taxi Voucher Scheme, stating that their mobility has been restricted since the Taxi Voucher Scheme was introduced. These form the main body of complaints.

5 OPERATIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

- 5.1 At present there is no accurate method of calculating the recommended issue for each quarter. This is due to the following circumstances:
 - 5.1.1 As the number of recipients increase, the amount of the allocation to the recipients decreases.
 - 5.1.2 It is difficult to determine the potential growth in the number of users, and the level at which vouchers will be redeemed, due to the limited amount of historical data available for analysis
 - 5.1.3 New applicants are currently issued vouchers from the 1st of the month following receipt of their application. This together with the relationship between the number of vouchers issued to ambulant and wheelchair users, and the denomination of the vouchers, can have the effect of reducing the number of vouchers issued to users. It can also potentially leave a substantial number of vouchers unallocated at the end of the financial year. Whilst this unallocated amount can be carried forward to the following year and can provide a buffer preventing overspend, users may not receive the full benefit due to them.

6 CONCLUSIONS

- 6.1 The usage statistics and comments from the Customer survey would indicate that the objectives of the scheme are being satisfied.
- 6.2 Many of the negative comments from the Customer Survey refer to the number of vouchers being issued. With the increasing number of applicants and a fixed budget, the number of vouchers issued to each user is likely to decrease.
- 6.3 Journey envelopes were issued to users on the first issue of vouchers, but were discontinued because despatch envelopes were too bulky and increased the postage cost.
- 6.4 A number of comments from the survey referred to the use of vouchers in Taxis licensed by neighbouring Authorities. No approach has been made to the drivers, operators, or licensing Authorities. However, should members wish to consider this option, the additional resource required to administer the option, would be minimal.

7 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1 Given the current trend in the growth of the number of users qualifying for the scheme, it is estimated that by April 2003 there will be 65 wheelchair users and 290 non-wheelchair users. Assuming a quarterly allocation of £48 for a non wheelchair user, the calculation for the budget in respect of next year would be:

290 users at £48 per quarter	£55,680
65 users at £72 per quarter	<u>£18,720</u>
Total issue of vouchers	£74,400
Less contribution from Essex County Council	<u>-£20,000</u>
Total Rochford District Council Expenditure	<u>£54,400</u>

8 RECOMMENDATION

It is proposed that the Committee **RESOLVES**

- (1) That the report and the results of the survey be noted and a further report be prepared after 12 months operation of the scheme.
- (2) That the report and the results of the survey be shared with Essex County Council.
- (3) That consideration be given to the funding of the scheme for 2003/2004.

Steve Clarkson

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Background Papers:

None

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