

TAXI VOUCHER SCHEME

1 SUMMARY

- 1.1 Members to consider a scheme proposal recommended by the Dial a Ride Working Group to provide a substitute service using Taxi Vouchers.

2 BACKGROUND

- 2.1 In 1999 the Council gave preliminary notice to the South East Essex Dial a Ride (SEEDAR) Partnership that it intended to withdraw from the scheme in 2002. This was confirmed in July 2001 with a firm withdrawal date agreed on 31 March 2002.
- 2.2 Council set up a Working Group of Members to devise a substitute scheme using Taxi Vouchers in view of the substantial financial and resource investment made in the taxi service.
- 2.3 The Working Group met on 4 occasions to agree a policy statement on the provision of community transport in the District, to agree the admission criteria for a taxi voucher scheme and to agree operational details. These are set out in the Appendix to this report.
- 2.4 In formulating the scheme, the Working Group have taken cognisance of submissions from individual and group users of Dial a Ride, from organisations representing the elderly and disabled and of Government guidance on the provision of community transport.

3 FINANCIAL AND RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

- 3.1 The new scheme will be operated within the Revenue and Housing Management Division using existing staff resources. Qualifying members of the existing Taxi Voucher Scheme will be absorbed into the new scheme.
- 3.2 This financial year the Council will be contributing £31,600 to SEEDAR. In addition to this contribution the County Council make a contribution of around £20,000 on Rochford's behalf. Early indications are that the County are prepared to continue with this level of support to the new Taxi Voucher Scheme, although the final decision on this will not be known until the County Council budget is fixed in February 2002.
- 3.3 Consideration will need to be given to Rochford's own 2002/3 budget contribution which Members may wish to cash limit to £33,000, plus any County contribution.

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- 3.4 The amount of taxi vouchers available to any individual user will depend largely upon two elements. Firstly, the set-up and ongoing administration costs associated with the scheme and, secondly, the level of take-up. On this latter issue, as soon as the scheme has been finalised, the Head of Service intends to invite pre-registration in order to gauge the likely client base. Once this has been established other financial aspects can be fed into the budget process during the 2002/3 Estimates cycle.
- 3.5 SEEDAR have indicated that there may be some staff redundancy and early vehicle lease surrender costs associated with Rochford's withdrawal from Dial a Ride. The Head of Service is resisting these claims at present in view of the provisional notice given in 1999. Much will depend upon Southend Borough Council's own Best Value Review of Community Transport and whether staff and vehicles can be absorbed into a new integrated transport regime.

4 RECOMMENDATION

It is proposed that the Committee **RECOMMENDS:-**

- (1) That the Taxi Voucher Scheme set out in the Appendix to this report be approved and introduced from 1 April 2002.
- (2) That pre-registration be invited from existing Dial a Ride users and that the scheme be publicised.
- (3) That £33,000 be included in the Draft Estimate for 2002/3.

S J Clarkson

Head of Revenue and Housing Management

Background Papers:

Notes of Working Group Meeting
Government Guidance on Transport for the Elderly
Various letters

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TAXI VOUCHER SCHEME

Policy Statement

Rochford District Council recognises that there is a requirement to respond to the needs of special groups within the community who, for a variety of reasons, are unable to use conventional forms of public transport.

The ability to travel serves a number of functions for these groups, including:-

- Social Interaction – travelling provides an opportunity to meet and greet friends and neighbours.
- Independence – they do not want to rely on friends and family to take them to the shops, hospital, post office, etc.
- Participation – they are usually involved in a number of organisations such as luncheon clubs, community groups and church activities.
- Entertainment – participants enjoy getting out of the house and often travel as a means of entertainment.

The Council aims to meet the needs of its residents by providing taxi vouchers for travel within and outside the District to qualifying individuals. This is a new initiative, which will be introduced in 2002/3. The general scheme objectives are:-

- Equality of service delivery to all users.
- Reduction or elimination of abuse by individual users.
- Retention of dignity when travelling.
- An “on demand” flexible service.

The Council has made a substantial investment in improving the taxi service within the District both in terms of finance and resources, and believes that with the availability of wheelchair accessible taxis all users might travel in dignity and comfort.

The Council believes that access to the scheme should not be means tested but do believe that applicants should be in receipt of a Government allowance or benefit which reflects their disability and should not have a vehicle of their own.

Admission Criteria

1. Applicants must be 18 years of age or over and be permanent residents of the District.
2. Applicants must be in receipt of at least one of the following allowances or benefits:-
 - Attendance Allowance (mobility component)
 - Disability Living Allowance (mobility component)
 - Mobility Allowance
 - or be blind or partially sighted.
3. All applicants will be required to confirm that they are unable to use conventional forms of public transport because of their disability.
4. All applicants will be required to confirm that they do not have a vehicle of their own other than a personal mobility buggy.

Operational Details

1. Applicants will be required to register for the scheme on an annual basis for which a fee is payable (£5) and to provide two passport size photographs at their own expense.
2. Qualifying applicants will be issued with a registration card that will contain a photo-identity of the pass holder. The registration card must be produced to the vehicle driver at the start of each journey and cardholders need to state that they intend to tender taxi vouchers by way of payment.
3. Vouchers will be issued to applicants on a quarterly basis pro-rata to the time they enter the scheme and will be valid for three months only. Vouchers may not be re-dated and no refunds are offered for unused vouchers.
4. Vouchers may be tendered to the taxi driver/proprietor as if they were cash. They can therefore be given in part payment or overpayment, when change can be expected.
5. Vouchers will be in denominations of £2 only.
6. When travel can only be achieved by using a wheelchair accessible taxi or other specialist vehicle, it is advisable to book the journey in advance to avoid disappointment. Usually, three days notice is required in such instances.

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7. Drivers will check the identity of the user on each occasion and record this. Vouchers will be cancelled by the driver with an entry in the 'date used' box. Provided at least one registered user is travelling any number of additional passengers may travel up to the maximum carrying capacity of the vehicle.
 8. The Council aims to reduce or eliminate the fraudulent use of taxi vouchers and shares registration details with other Council departments and agencies. Fraudulent use of vouchers could lead to prosecution under the Theft Act 1978.
 9. The Council believes that review procedures are important. If an applicant believes they have been unfairly treated they can appeal, in the first instance, to the Head of Revenue and Housing Management. Grounds for an appeal might be that an applicant is not in receipt of one of the allowances set out in (2) above but is wholly reliant on the use of a wheelchair outside their home. Appeals must be in written form and state clearly the nature of the appeal. Appeals should be addressed to:-

Head of Revenue and Housing Management
Rochford District Council
7 South Street
Rochford
SS4 1BW