

# Supporting customers with sight loss - taxis and minicabs



Taxis and minicabs and the door to door service they provide are essential for people with disabilities. They are a key mode of transport for people who are blind and partially sighted, who are unable to drive and often face barriers when using public transport.

During the pandemic, it remains the case that service providers, including transport providers, have a duty under equality legislation to make reasonable adjustments for people with disabilities. And of course, providing such support also represents good customer service.

This document has been designed to ensure that drivers and other staff working to support taxi and minicab travel can feel confident when helping passengers with sight loss, whilst maintaining social distancing and other measures that are in place to prevent the spread of Covid-19.

## General principles

- Not everyone with vision impairment is totally blind and many retain some useful sight. Some will use a guide dog or a cane, but the majority travel without a mobility aid and so it may not always be apparent that they have sight loss.
- Just like anyone else, people with sight loss will have personal preferences in how they receive support. Probably the most important tip is to always ask the person to tell you how they would like to be helped. It should be possible to assist someone safely but still enable them to retain their dignity.
- If the passenger is a guide dog owner, it is a criminal offence to refuse to carry their dog, or to charge extra for doing so. The only exception to this is if the driver has a medical exemption certificate from the licensing authority due to a genuine medical condition that is aggravated by exposure to dogs. If this is the case, you or your company should help find the passenger another taxi/minicab.

- If assisting a guide dog owner, do not interfere with the dog and only give instructions to its owner.
- As many people with sight loss have some useful vision, wearing a high visibility jacket or tabard may be helpful for many customers with sight loss as it could make it easier for them to differentiate you from others.

The remainder of this guidance consists of practical tips on things you can do to support passengers with sight loss and advice on how best to communicate with them. This should ensure your own safety as well as that of any vision impaired passengers.

### **Practical things that drivers and other staff can do**

If you offer a pre-booking service, ensure that your website or customer service staff taking telephone enquiries provides information about access to the minicab/taxi, including any protocols that have been introduced around social distancing, such as all passengers must sit in the back of the vehicle, or whether face covering are required.

When picking up the passenger, pull right up to the kerb to help vision impaired passengers avoid tripping.

If you cannot find the passenger at the pick-up point, when calling them use clear language to explain where the vehicle is parked - e.g. "I am parked on the right hand side of the road outside 1 Bridge Street", rather than "I am in front of the red car". Do not flash your lights or beep your horn to get the passenger's attention. Once you have located them, you may need to move your vehicle to pull up directly in front of them so they can easily locate you.

It is really helpful to explain which direction the car is facing and the layout of the vehicle so the passenger can get into it safely - e.g. if the car door opens outwards or is a sliding door, if the seats all face forwards.

If partitions have been installed to minimise infection, and a microphone and speaker is not in place, inform the passenger and let them know any essential information before they get into the vehicle.

If the passenger is a guide dog owner, ask them if they would like their dog in the footwell next to them or in the back of the vehicle if suitable (for example if the vehicle is an estate car or hatchback with removable parcel shelf). Guide dogs are trained to sit with their owner at all times, not to bother other people and not to climb on seats. If the passenger wants their dog in the footwell, you may need to pull the front passenger seat forwards to increase space in the footwell.

As confirmed in the High Court case *Thomas McNutt v Transport for London* [2019], taxi meters should only start once passengers with disabilities have boarded the vehicle.

Keep the passenger informed about any delays, diversion or other things which might affect the journey. If road or pavement layouts have been changed due to lockdown measures, clearly explain these.

Before starting the journey check that the person is comfortable and if appropriate ask them if the temperature in the vehicle is OK for them (and in the case of a guide dog owner, their dog).

When you arrive at the final destination, tell the passenger what the fare is or what the meter says. Some passengers may need support when paying the fare and you must use accurate and specific language - e.g. “the card machine is to the right of your left hand” rather than “the card machine is here”. When paying with cash, due to the need to socially distance, please give verbal directions for where they should place the money for the fare, and when giving change, explain where you have put the money.

Once you have arrived at their desired destination, check to ensure they know where they are and ask them if they are OK to continue or if they need further assistance. They may need guiding to the door of their destination. See below for tips on how to do so safely.

### **Effective Communication hints and tips**

- Identify yourself - always introduce yourself and inform the person of your name and job title.
- Always ask the person if they would like any assistance or help and ask them what their name is.

- Continue to use normal body language. This will positively affect the tone of your voice and provide extra information to the person who is vision impaired.
- Don't be afraid to use everyday language.
- Never channel conversation through a third person. Always speak directly to the vision impaired person.
- When verbally guiding a person, ask them if they would like you to walk ahead of them, behind or on their left or right (2 metres distance). Their preference may allow them to use any remaining vision.
- Provide clear instructions when describing a route or when you would like the person to change direction e.g. Left and Right.
- Describe main features of area to help the person orientate themselves - e.g. "the taxi/minicab has pulled up on the left-hand side of the road, and when you get out you will be facing the main entrance". You may wish to use the 'clock face technique' when describing the environment in front of the person - e.g. 'directly in front of you at 12 o'clock is the main entrance, to your right at 3 o'clock is a pedestrian crossing. On your left at 9 o'clock is the start of the high street'.
- Describe the environment around you as features (landmarks and sound) may act as clues to help the person orientate themselves e.g. noise such as 'the traffic will be on your left'.
- When walking always let the person know about differences in the floor surface such as kerbs, steps and elevation (up and down)
- Let them know about any changes in surface such as tactile paving, gravel, tarmac and grass.
- Inform the person of any obstacles near them that could be trip hazards or that they could accidentally bump into e.g. bollards, posts, benches or bins.

- Never leave a conversation with a person without saying so. It's really important they know when you have left them and they know what to do next once you have gone.
- Finally, consider asking how the experience was for them or if there is anything that could have been done differently. If there is this could not only benefit you but also the next customer with sight loss for whom you provide assistance.

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