

Extract from minutes of –

DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

7th FEBRUARY, 2012

“Consultation - Taxi Fare and Taximeter Regulations

The Committee was informed that the Department for the Environment had issued for consultation a document which sought the views of a wide range of bodies and agencies on a proposed introduction of minimum fare tariffs which would apply to all types of taxis in Northern Ireland. The Department had proposed also that all taxis in Northern Ireland would be obliged to operate a standardised taximeter which would be calibrated to the standard set tariff.

The Director advised the Members that under the new proposals all taxis would charge a minimum fare of £3.00 from Monday to Thursday, with that cost rising to £3.40 after 8.00 p.m. However, it was proposed that minimum fares after 8.00 p.m. on Fridays would rise to £4.20, and that this charge would apply also on Saturday and Sunday evenings. Such proposals would represent a 40% increase on present minimum fares. It was pointed out that the aim of the changes was to protect customers from overcharging and the Committee was apprised also of additional charges which would be levied for the carrying of additional passengers and the scope for passengers to negotiate prices for longer journeys. Accordingly, the Committee considered the undernoted response to the consultation:

Council Response

“General comments

- **The Council recognise that the introduction of a new maximum fare tariff for all taxis in Northern Ireland, along with the requirement to have a taximeter calibrated to this fare is intended to promote fair competition and enhance consumer protection however, the Council is concerned that the maximum set tariff proposed will make travel by taxis unaffordable for individuals and families on low income. In particular the Council would not support the premium flag drop tariff for what is termed ‘unsociable hours’ for providing a taxi service between 8pm – 6am during the week, at weekends and on bank holidays when there are reduced or no public transport services.**
- **The recent Travel Survey for Northern Ireland 2008-2010 indicated that 43% of households in Belfast have no car ownership and therefore are dependent on other forms of transport to access jobs and services. The Council would be concerned that for economically or socially disadvantaged communities, the costs of travel by taxi could be a major barrier to participating in everyday activities in particular activities in the evenings, weekends and Bank Holidays.**

- The Council considers that the flag drop tariff which is the fare showing on the meter at the beginning of the journey is not affordable in particular the premium drop flag tariff of £4.20 for providing a taxi service for unsociable hours at weekends and Bank holidays. The proposed premium could have an adverse impact on the evening economy at a time when businesses are struggling to attract users. Consideration should also be given to implications for community safety where individuals may opt to walk home at night time rather than pay the premium fare proposed.

Q1. Is there under supply of taxis at these times? Do you consider that provision of an unsociable hours premium is appropriate?

The Council does not consider the provision of an unsociable hours premium at the rate proposed as appropriate. Any additional charges in the evening during the week, weekends, bank holidays so called 'unsociable hours', may discourage people from travelling, given that public transport provision is reduced in evenings and during holidays or weekends. The Council considers the proposed maximum fare tariff of £4.20 for weekends and bank holidays could be unaffordable for lower income individuals and families. The proposed premium could also have an adverse impact on the evening economy and potential impacts on personal safety.

Q2. Do you agree with the proposals for the maximum Fare Tariff in Northern Ireland?

The Council agree that a maximum tariff may be beneficial to the users and prevent over charging but as previously stated there is concern at the high rate proposed for the maximum flag drop tariff by the Department may have adverse implications for the city. Although drivers would have the opportunity to agree a reduced fare, the Council believe this introduces uncertainty; may not be apparent to the user or offered by the drivers and may deter individuals from using taxis.

Q3. Do you agree that a taxi operating under regulated fare should have only one Taximeter fitted?

Yes

Q4. Do you agree that permitted taximeters should be held on a list controlled by DVA until October 2016 when all taximeters should be compliant with Measuring Instruments Directive (MID) standards?

Yes

Q5. Do you agree that taximeters should continue to be clock calendar type?

Yes

Q6. Do you agree that a taximeter should be designed to ensure clarity of fare for ease of use by passengers, including on screen display, position of the meter within the taxi, single currency display and verbal clarification from driver if required?

Yes

Q7. Do you agree that all taximeters must be capable of operating a receipt printer which has secure transmission from the taximeter?

Yes and it should be a requirement to offer a receipt to all passengers. The Council would request clarification if a receipt will be provided if a lower fare is agreed.

Q8. Do you agree with the proposed acceptable optional functionalities being permitted but not required for all taximeters?

Yes

Q9. Do you agree that DVA should be responsible for the approval of taximeter, including publication of a list documenting permitted taximeters, until full implementation of MID?

Yes

Q10. Do you agree with the Department making it an offence to forge alter break or use a seal with the intention to deceive?

Yes

Q11. Do you agree that it is the drivers' responsibility to report if the taximeter is broken, and that until the taximeter is fully repaired and sealed the taxi will not be used for Hire and Reward?

Yes

Q12. Do you agree that all taxis operating to a regulated fare should have an illuminated sign which is extinguished automatically when the Taximeter is turned on?

Yes

Q13. Do you agree Taxis operating within a regulated fare must display a 'fares board' which can be viewed clearly by all seated passengers?

Yes this will allow for a transparent fare charging scheme, however the display should include information that a reduced fare can be agreed.

Q14. Do you agree with the assumptions of the impact of the proposed changes? If not please can you explain why and provide any evidence which supports that view?

The Council agrees that the proposed changes will create a transparent fare charging regime which should reduce the risk to users from over charging. However there are concern that the high levels for the flag drop down charges are not affordable.

The recent Travel Survey for Northern Ireland 2008-2010 indicated that 43% of households in Belfast have no car ownership and therefore are dependent on other forms of transport to access entertainment, jobs and services. The Council would have concerns that for economically or socially disadvantaged communities, the costs of travel by taxi could be an additional barrier to participating in everyday activities especially activities in the evenings, weekends and Bank Holidays when there are reduced or no public transport services.”

After discussion, the Committee endorsed the response, subject to it emphasising the Members’ opposition to the concept of double or triple charging by taxi companies and to the Committee’s opposition to the introduction of minimum pricing policies which could impact on firms at a local or community level thus creating a monopoly within the City of two or three firms.”