

Appendix 3

Extract from

**COMMITTEE FOR REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT
PUBLIC TRANSPORT IN BELFAST CITY CENTRE
ISSUES PAPER
16 March 2016**

BACKGROUND

1. For some time the Committee for Regional Development (the Committee) has listened and questioned the planning and development of the public hire taxi ranks in Belfast city centre. This has included, in March 2015, a visit to the present taxi ranks around Belfast and, in January 2016, the Committee took evidence from Belfast Public Hire Taxis. The Committee has not only taken evidence from the Department for Regional Development (the Department) and Belfast Public Hire Taxis but has also considered further information and correspondence from a range of other stakeholders.

2. Whilst efforts have undoubtedly been made to try to address the problems of transport around the city centre, there is a long way to go and it will be difficult to bring these issues to a conclusion that satisfies all concerned. At its meeting on 27 January the Committee heard the concerns expressed by Belfast Public Hire Taxis and, in an attempt to bring these issues to a conclusion, it agreed to host a stakeholder event focused on working collectively to make Belfast a modern city served by all forms of public transport.

Taxi specific issues

18. The lack of available kerb space, as mentioned earlier, has an impact on the picking up and dropping off of customers and it is felt that this is an issue that needs addressed.

19. There are insufficient parking spaces for public and private hire taxis that adds to the traffic congestion around the city.

20. Taxi ranks need to be better distributed throughout the city, e.g. at shopping centres; there is a lack of footfall at many of these that has resulted in them becoming effectively 'dead' ranks. This, however, is an issue that may be addressed through the use of appropriate signage.

21. There are proposals for the allocation of additional ranks. However, their locations will need to be carefully determined as more ranks may result in safety issues for pedestrians and vehicles as well as customer access problems and vehicular access problems for businesses receiving deliveries.

22. New legislation means that any wheelchair accessible taxis can be flagged down and can pick up at ranks; an area where a level playing field will exist between public and private hire taxis that should be welcomed.

23. Private hire taxi users expect a door-to-door service and this is not possible as a result of the bus lanes; people are having to walk to get to the taxi and this can have safety implications. More

work is needed to attempt to address this issue to the satisfaction of the taxi user as well as providing the necessary bus services.

24. It was felt that there is a need for the Department to publicly consult on permitting taxis to use the bus lanes although it is to be expected that response received will vary greatly on accounts of the reasons outlined in this paper.

25. A view expressed was that, whilst large amounts of funding is provided to Translink, the public hire taxi sector is not being provided with the tools it requires to improve its service. The Committee would be interested to receive the Department's thoughts on this view.

Signage, Marshalling & Enforcement

26. There are important points, such as Donegal Square North, for tourists and the general public to access public hire taxis and improved signposting would improve this experience and reduce the need for so many ranks around the city. The Department indicated that the signage at Victoria Square shopping centre is ineffective, so perhaps the use of signage and the location of the signs needs to be carefully considered – better communications with users would help raise awareness of the signage and people would look out for these.

27. Departmental officials indicated that the Department is reviewing its signage for bus lanes and this is to be welcomed; a suggestion made referred to the need to colour code the bus lanes, however, the cost and frequency of resurfacing of a coloured surface would make this unsustainable.

28. Taxi marshals would add valuable organisation and control to the management of customers for both public and private hire taxis and could facilitate the feeder system as well as coordinating the distribution of taxis. They would potentially also provide safety for customers as well as a point of focus for users. There would be an obvious cost associated with the provision of marshals and views were expressed as to whether it should be privately or publically funded. Irrespective of who funds it, this is something that should be piloted and the funding addressed if the pilot is deemed to be a success.

29. It was suggested that private hire taxi drivers are illegally picking up fares; this is an issue that needs to be enforced.

30. It was agreed that there needs to be greater 24-hour enforcement and, whilst this is resource intensive, this enforcement needs to be carried out.

31. In order to remove the uncertainty that currently exists, there was a view expressed that a simplified licencing system needs to be developed for both public and private hire taxis. The Committee would welcome the Department's views on this proposal.

Points agreed

42. The taxi rank at Donegal Square North causes safety and access concerns and needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency.

45. Distribution of taxi ranks needs to be reviewed alongside a need for better information on location of public transport and clearer signage available to everyone, particularly infrequent visitors and tourists.

46. There is a need to publicly consult on the sharing of bus lanes with taxis and other road users. These, and other consultations, need to be extensive to ensure that nobody is left without their say; particular those that the system is meant to serve.

47. The Committee would be interested to receive the Department's thoughts on the view that funding is necessary to provide the public hire taxi sector with the tools necessary to improve its service.

48. Better communication is key; people need to be connected with the services that they want to use and communicating the availability of the full range of services will improve the customer experience and increase the likelihood of them seeing the city centre as fully accessible and that meets their needs. Signage, both to taxi ranks and on bus lanes, would help to address this issue.

49. The provision of taxi marshals should be piloted and the associated costs assessed.

50. Consideration of how to improve enforcement should be considered, as well as the feasibility of a single tier licencing system for all taxi drivers.

51. Taxis don't feature in local plans / strategies and this needs to be addressed; lack of inclusion in strategies or consultation processes by government departments and Councils has led to them being 'invisible' in public transport plans and they need to be included in the process, e.g. the Belfast transport hub.

58. Problems in relation to taxis cannot be allowed to dictate the development and progress of the city.

59. Whilst attempting to address the issue relating to taxis, it is essential to promote the use of sustainable transport and this should be at the forefront of all considerations.

60. A feeder system would help to address some of the issues at the ranks, including that at Donegal Square North.

NEXT STEPS

63. The Committee agreed to include this paper in the CRD Legacy Report 2016 and request that the new Committee for Infrastructure takes these concerns forward in the new mandate.

64. The Committee also agreed to forward this paper to the Department for response and also to publish the paper on the Assembly's website.