



Revised Imtac position paper on taxis

(January 2023)

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About Imtac

The Inclusive Mobility and Transport Advisory Committee (Imtac) is a committee of disabled people and older people as well as others including carers and key transport professionals. Its role is to advise Government and others in Northern Ireland on issues that affect the mobility of Deaf people, disabled people and older people.

The aim of Imtac is to ensure that Deaf people, disabled people and older people have the same opportunities as everyone else to travel when and where they want.

Imtac receives support from the Department for Infrastructure (herein after referred to as the Department).

Background

Imtac previously published a position paper on taxis in 2008. The paper was written in the context of changes to taxi regulation proposed under the then Taxis Bill (now Taxis Act) and highlighted a series of measures Government could implement to improve access to taxi services.

Since 2008 there have been substantial changes to the provision of taxi services, largely resulting from the implementation of the Taxis Act but also from developments in technology resulting in platforms such as Uber. Over the past two years the COVID-19 pandemic followed by the cost of living crisis has had a profound impact on both the taxi trade and taxi users. Given these developments Imtac has decided to refresh and update this position paper.

Developments since 2008

A key priority for the changes proposed under the Taxis Act was to improve access to services for Deaf people, disabled people and older people. Important changes included:

- New vehicle standards intended to improve the accessibility of wheelchair accessible vehicles (WAVs)

- Licensing requirements for all taxis operating from ranks to be wheelchair accessible (designed to increase the number and availability of WAVs)
- The setting of a maximum fare designed to remove discriminatory charging
- Licensing requirements for new and existing drivers to undertake disability awareness training
- The introduction of Operator Licensing

It should be noted that Imtac was sceptical from an early stage of the review of taxi regulation that linking wheelchair accessibility to ranks would be effective in increasing the numbers of WAVs, preferring linking the issue to Operator Licensing.

Many of the provisions of the Taxis Act proved controversial with the taxi trade and were not introduced until 2016. Both before and after the introduction of these changes Imtac received feedback from Deaf people, disabled people and older people about growing difficulties accessing services. These difficulties included:

- A general reduction in choice as smaller operators stopped trading or were bought over by larger operators
- A significant and growing reduction in the availability of wheelchair accessible vehicles
- Continued reports of discriminatory charging
- Continued reports of discriminatory service provision including the refusal to carry wheelchair users and people travelling with assistance dogs

In 2018 the Department for Infrastructure in conjunction with Imtac undertook a survey of Deaf people, disabled people and older people to garner their views about taxi services and the impact of changes introduced under the Taxis Act. Although still to be published Imtac understands the survey findings largely confirm the issues highlighted above. The Committee also understands that a majority of Deaf people, disabled people and older people participating in the survey felt that access to taxi services had worsened since the passage of the Taxis Act.

The impact of Covid-19 and the cost of living crisis

Restrictions introduced as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic have had a profound affect on taxi services. Imtac recognises the pandemic has been hugely challenging for the taxi trade with many issues, such as driver shortages, continuing even after we have emerged from restrictions.

More recently the cost of living crisis has further impacted on both the taxi trade and users. The cumulative impact of the pandemic and cost of living crisis on Deaf people, disabled people and older people has been to further exacerbate issues with access through both reduced availability and affordability of taxi services including accessible taxis.

Revised policy position on taxis

Introduction

In our 2008 paper we set out the importance of taxis as part of an accessible and inclusive transport system. Today taxis remain an important mode of travel offering a personal, door-to-door service which is often available in places and times where other transport isn't. Because of this taxis have been an extremely valuable service for many Deaf people, disabled people and older people in Northern Ireland. Indeed because of the lack of alternatives, taxis remain the only travel option for many everyday journeys with disabled people and older people relying on services disproportionately compared to other sections of society.

Despite changes introduced by the Taxis Act, many Deaf people, disabled people and older people continue to experience the same barriers we highlighted in our 2008 paper - barriers which make it difficult or impossible to use taxis. These barriers include the accessibility of vehicles, the availability of services, the attitudes of drivers and the cost of services. Whilst access to other forms of public transport have improved for Deaf people, disabled people and older people over the last decade, making taxi services more accessible has remained a challenge despite the changes to regulation introduced under the Taxis Act. Existing barriers to using taxis have been further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and more recently the cost of living crisis.

As in 2008 Imtac acknowledges the particular difficulties and costs faced by the taxi trade in providing and making services more accessible. We recognise these difficulties and costs have worsened during the pandemic and cost of living crisis. Such costs include purchasing accessible vehicles, undergoing training and more recently the unprecedented rises in fuel prices. However, Deaf people, disabled people and older people have the right to the same access to taxi services as other members of the public and currently still experience unacceptable discrimination and inequality when accessing services.

The Committee has developed this policy paper to highlight that the current regulation of taxis in Northern Ireland is not working for Deaf people, disabled people and older people and to outline the clear need for change. It stresses the urgent need to strengthen regulation of taxis as well as the need for Government to do more to provide direct support to the taxi trade to make changes to services.

Strengthening regulation and rights

It is clear from all the available evidence that the changes introduced under the Taxis Act are not working for many Deaf people, disabled people and older people and that the pandemic and cost of living crisis has made matters worse. Imtac is recommending significant changes to current regulation to address this situation.

As in the previous review of taxi regulation, addressing the availability of WAVs remains a key priority in future changes to regulation. The Committee understands that although there has been a decrease, the numbers of WAVs has not dropped significantly since 2016. This would be indicative of operators choosing not to make services available to wheelchair users. This must be reflected in changes to regulation.

Imtac recommends the following changes be made to regulation in regard to increasing the availability of WAVs:

- in addition to the 2008 approach requiring taxis operating from ranks to be wheelchair accessible, use existing powers under the Taxis Act to link the provision of WAVs to Operator Licensing

- Using existing powers under the Disability Discrimination Act introduce a new legal duty to require taxi drivers to carry wheelchair users, broadly similar to existing legal duties for assistance dog owners / users

Despite it being illegal to refuse to carry a person travelling with an assistance dog (except under specific circumstances) for well over a decade, refusals are still too common an occurrence. It is worth noting that throughout this period there have been no prosecutions of taxi drivers for this offence in Northern Ireland.

For Imtac, legal protections are useless if never enforced. Whilst the Committee recognises that the Department has taken steps to raise awareness amongst the taxi trade of these legal requirements, continued discrimination indicates a need for stronger measures. Imtac recommends that the Department works with a range of stakeholders including the Equality Commission to ensure mechanisms are in place for disabled people to make complaints about refusals, supporting their legal right to travel on an equal basis to others.

Making fares understandable and affordable

Many people including Deaf people, disabled people and older people are unaware of the maximum fare regulations introduced under the Taxis Act or how to complain if they feel they have been overcharged. Imtac recommends that the Department strengthens regulation to ensure operators display accessible information about fares. Regulation should also be strengthened to ensure that all operators must have an inclusive and accessible complaints mechanism. In addition to strengthening regulation the Department must do more to educate consumers about fares and to ensure it is easier to make a complaint to the Department where a passenger feels they have been overcharged.

The Department has the power to regulate fares for all taxi services. Whilst both the pandemic and cost of living crisis has created justifiable arguments for increasing fares, the impact of changes will impact most negatively on disabled people and older people who in general have no other travel choice and tend to have less disposable income. Fare increases should be considered in conjunction with schemes such as taxi vouchers / taxicard which reduce the cost of services for eligible groups.

Providing financial incentives to taxi operators

In 2008 Imtac recognised that improving the accessibility of taxi services would have a financial impact on the operators of services. We recognise the additional financial impact of the pandemic and and cost of living crisis has had on the taxi trade. In our previous paper Imtac recommended the Department seek to maximise the financial incentives available to taxi operators wishing to make their services accessible. Little has been done in the intervening years to provide financial support to the taxi trade.

The Committee reiterates its previous recommendation for the Department to maximise financial incentives to taxi operators to make their services more accessible. Potential incentives could include reduced licence fees for operators purchasing accessible taxis. This is likely to have a minimal financial impact on Government but at the same time is of limited benefit to taxi operators. At the opposite end of the spectrum consideration should be given to direct subsidy from Government to enable operators to purchase wheelchair accessible vehicles. Clearly such a proposal would have major financial implications for Government but would be of greatest benefit to operators and ultimately consumers.

Integrating taxis into transport policy and public transport services

The Department has responsibility for transport policy in Northern Ireland. In 2008 Imtac recommended the Department do more to involve taxis in the delivery of policy and services. Despite this recommendation taxis have been underused as means of delivering integrated accessible transport services here. Imtac believes that the Department must do more to support existing taxi operators by involving taxis in the future delivery of services. Imtac would be supportive of two services where taxis can play a key role.

Demand Responsive Transport (DRT)

Many people cannot access the current public transport network. This may be because the network is not easily accessed by them or particularly in rural areas because there are limited or no

services. Flexible demand responsive services are seen as one solution to these difficulties.

Imtac considers that taxis can play a greater role in delivering future DRT services. With many taxi operators struggling, particularly in rural areas, Imtac recommends that Government should look to utilise taxis in the delivery of DRT services.

For future DRT services Government must set standards for operators requiring improved access to taxi services for disabled people and older people as condition of public funding. The Department must stipulate vehicle and training standards for operators delivering DRT services.

Even with improved taxi accessibility the design of taxis will not meet the requirements of people who use large wheelchairs. Given the current limitations of taxi accessibility, DRT services must not be operated solely by taxis. DRT services must be provided using a range a of vehicles recognising the varied access requirements of passengers.

Taxicard / taxi voucher schemes

The Department could encourage the provision of accessible taxis by introducing schemes that provide disabled people with the money to buy taxi services themselves. Such schemes are operated by local authorities elsewhere in the United Kingdom and are a complement to concessionary travel schemes on other public transport.

Some taxicard schemes allow people a set amount of discounted taxi journeys over a year, usually the equivalent of one return per week, while other local authorities issue a set amount of vouchers to pay for taxi journeys over a year.

Imtac believes there is merit in schemes that reduce the cost of taxis to those Deaf people, disabled people and older people who rely on taxis for everyday journeys, particularly given the cost of living crisis. Such schemes would complement existing concessionary travel schemes and broaden the travel choice available to those disabled people and older people who find using conventional public transport difficult or impossible. When designing such a scheme the Department must set standards for

vehicle accessibility and training which participating operators would have to comply as a condition of public funding.

Improving Government and public service contracting

In our 2008 paper we highlighted that many Government Departments and public services in Northern Ireland contract in taxi services to enable people to access their services and facilities. Millions of pounds are still spent each year here on transporting people by taxi to schools, hospitals and places such as day centres. Many Deaf people, disabled people and older people travel in this way.

As in 2008 despite the money spent by Government and public services on taxis not enough is being done to ensure that such transport is safe and accessible to people using it. Anecdotal feedback from the users of these services indicates that vehicles used are not always suitable. For example some “accessible vehicles” do not have the necessary tie downs to transport wheelchair users safely. On other occasions drivers do not use equipment or use it incorrectly. The clear impression of contracting taxi services by wider Government in Northern Ireland is that contracts are still awarded on cost grounds rather than quality or passenger safety.

Policies such as the transformation of our Health Service and the creation of regional centres of specialism requiring clients/patients to travel is likely to create increasing use of taxis by Government. Given this Imtac reiterates its previous recommendation for a review to take place around how Government as a whole buys in taxi services. In addition we also recommend that the planning and establishment of regional centres should include a detailed analysis of transport needs of all of society to access the centres and how that need will be accommodated.

In future all contracts here must set out minimum vehicle accessibility and training standards which all operators bidding for contracts must meet. Such an approach not only supports the proposed changes to taxi regulation and rewards good operators but also ensures that the safety and comfort of passengers, not cost, is the priority.

Conclusion

Imtac has published this revised position paper on taxis as, despite the review carried out by the Department and changes introduced to regulation, the availability of taxi services and their accessibility has not improved. On the contrary it has clearly become more difficult for many disabled people, older people and people in rural areas to access a suitable taxi service. The Committee recognises that the Covid-19 pandemic and the cost of living crisis have both impacted on the industry but believes that an in-depth review must now be undertaken. This must reflect the views expressed by Deaf people, disabled people and older people in the 2018 survey and experience since, and action taken to ensure that taxis can continue to provide an effective accessible service as an important component of a wider accessible and inclusive transport system.