



**Comments from Imtac on the consultation on the  
Taxis Act (NI) 2008 Taxi Licence and Powers of  
Seizure**

**September 2011**

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## **About Imtac**

- 1 Imtac is a committee of disabled people and older people as well as others including key transport professionals. Our role is to advise Government and others in Northern Ireland on issues that affect the mobility of older people and disabled people.
- 2 Our aim is to ensure that older people and disabled people have the same opportunities as everyone else to travel when and where they want.

## **General comments**

- 3 Imtac welcomes the opportunity to comment on the current consultation. The Committee has been a key stakeholder during the review of taxi regulation in Northern Ireland and the passage of the Taxis Act.
- 4 Disabled people and older people rely on taxis to get around more than others in our society. Despite this there are barriers which make using taxis more difficult for disabled people and older people. These barriers include lack of suitable, accessible and safe vehicles, discriminatory fares, and the negative attitudes of staff providing taxi services. Imtac acknowledges that the Department took account of these barriers in the powers included under the provisions of Taxis Act.
- 5 In responding to the current consultation our primary focus is on measures that will help promote a more inclusive and accessible taxi service. Our comments reflect that disabled people and older people with different impairments may have differing requirements for an accessible taxi service. The Committee has commented on those proposals in the consultation where we feel the changes are designed to benefit consumers in the broader sense including disabled people and older people. As some of the proposals do not affect disabled people, older people (or broader consumers) it is not appropriate for Imtac to give an opinion. In future consultations the Department could perhaps give a third option for

consultees responding to question relating to “Don’t Know” or “No Opinion”.

### **Specific comments on the proposals**

*Q1: Do you agree with the proposal to require evidence of a valid certificate of appropriate insurance for the vehicle at the time of testing?*

Imtac agrees with this proposal.

*Q2: Do you agree with the proposal to require all vehicles first licensed as a Taxi after 1 January 2012 to be M1 type approved?*

Imtac agrees with this proposal.

*Q3: Do you agree that all Taxis should be able to be hailed and to pick up without a pre-booking?*

Imtac is supportive of a single tier system as we believe this simplifies using taxis for consumers. The Committee is broadly supportive of allowing all taxis to be hailed and to pick up without a pre-booking with some reservations. Specifically in relation to hail and ride this will clearly benefit wider consumer and some disabled people and older people. However this will be of limited or no use to people with a visual impairment. The Department should satisfy itself that under the changes people who would find using hail and ride difficult or impossible will still have easy access to taxi services by other means.

*Q4: Do you agree with the proposal to require all vehicles standing at ranks to be wheelchair accessible in the future?*

Improving vehicle accessibility was one of key priorities for Imtac during the review of taxi regulation. Clearly we would like to see an increase in the numbers of vehicles accessible to wheelchair users particularly in locations outside Belfast. However it should also be recognised that other disabled people have different access requirements and that current wheelchair accessible vehicles can be difficult to access/egress. Imtac recognises that the Department has limited options in terms of

improving the accessibility of taxis, particularly as the Department for Transport in London has decided not to introduce vehicle accessibility standards for taxis. Imtac does feel that more discussion should place between the Department and stakeholders representing disabled people and older people about how vehicle standards are improved to ensure the majority of disabled people can access services with relative ease.

The requirement that all taxis standing at ranks are wheelchair accessible is a measure that could potentially help to address the difficulties currently experienced by wheelchair users in obtaining a suitable service. However before fully supporting such a proposal Imtac would need assurances that the Department are satisfied that other disabled people and older people are not disadvantaged and those that require other types of vehicles do have an easily accessible alternative.

On a broader issue Imtac does have concerns that proposals to increase the number of wheelchair accessible vehicles through linking to taxi ranks will not be fully effective. We have concerns that particularly outside Belfast (where the demand for this service is greatest) there will be little incentive for operators and drivers to use ranks if demand can be met easily by pre-booking or picking up on street. We strongly recommend that the Department looks to link vehicle accessibility to operator licensing as well as rank provision. Under such an arrangement the requirement to provide accessible vehicles could be linked to size of the taxi operator.

Imtac believes that accessibility requirements for vehicles should apply to any ranks particularly those provided at major transport hubs including bus and train stations and airports. The Committee would ask the Department to clarify what barriers, if any, would prevent applying vehicle accessibility requirements for ranks to ranks not currently designated by Roads Service.

*Q5: Do you consider that a lead-in period of 4 years is sufficient for existing drivers to plan for a move to a wheelchair accessible vehicle if they wish to continue standing at ranks outside Belfast?*

Accessibility improvements have been made to the accessibility of other transport services as a result of the Disability Discrimination Act. Imtac

would prefer if changes were introduced sooner but understands that a reasonable time is required to allow taxi providers to meet new regulation. As an organisation of disabled people and older people Imtac is frustrated about the length of time it has taken to improve taxi services.

*Q6: Do you agree with the proposals to continue to require all wheelchair accessible vehicles used at Taxi stands to comply with these requirements?*

Imtac is concerned that the current accessibility requirements that have to be met by Belfast Public Hire Taxis are inadequate. Current requirements allow the use of vehicles that are over 20 years old which even the manufacturers admit offer limited wheelchair access. The requirements have also allowed the introduction of adapted vehicles which also offer limited access to wheelchair users. As previously stated consideration of wider issues of accessibility for disabled people who do not use a wheelchair is also necessary.

Imtac recommends that the Department review and revise current vehicle standards with a view to modernising the current requirements. Modern requirements should seek to improve access for more wheelchair users whilst making it easier for people with other impairments to travel. As new standards would have a significant impact on the taxi trade in terms of replacing existing vehicles that are wheelchair accessible Imtac believes it would be fair to introduce interim measures based on existing requirements but to set a future date where all taxis must meet modernised standards.

Imtac believes that a situation could arise where vehicles that meet lesser standards could still operate as wheelchair accessible if pre-booked or hailed in the street. The Committee would like the Department to clarify how it is proposed that all taxis meet existing and future requirements for accessibility.

*Q7: Do you agree with the proposals to require the Taxi plates to be fixed to the Taxis roof sign rather than the front and back of the vehicle?*

The Committee agrees with this proposal. We also welcome the retention of internal plates but would appreciate confirmation from the Department that drivers will be required to display these plates.

On a related issue Imtac would suggest the Department to explore the feasibility of producing a tactile plate – perhaps embossed – which would reassure people with a visual impairment that they are travelling in a legal taxi.

*Q8: Do you agree with the proposals to differentiate wheelchair accessible vehicles from other Taxis?*

The Committee agrees with this proposal but suggest that all vehicles that offer wheelchair accessibility should be required to display these plates, regardless if they operate at ranks or not.

*Q10: Do you agree with the proposals for Taxi bus plating as a short term measure?*

Imtac would appreciate more information from the Department about the nature of proposed changes to the regulation of Taxi Buses before we reach a definitive position.

*Q11: Do you agree with the requirement for retro-fitted LPG systems to be fitted and certified in compliance with the Road Vehicles (Approval) Regulations 2009?*

*Q12: Do you agree with the proposal to expand the requirement for an engine to be switched off when the fuel cap is open, regardless of the fuel type?*

Imtac agrees with these proposals but would like to ask if any consideration has been given to requiring taxis to switch off engines whilst parked at ranks. The build up of fumes in these locations can cause difficulties for some disabled people and older people with respiratory conditions and is harmful to the environment generally.

*Q13: Do you agree with the proposals to require only one passenger to be carried per seat?*

The Committee agrees with this proposal.

*Q14: Do you agree that the Department should take account of safe and unobstructed access and egress from each individual seat when assessing maximum seating capacity of a Taxi?*

The Committee would like more information from the Department about this proposal before reaching a definitive position. Does this mean for example that middle seats in a vehicle (ie with seats either side) potentially cannot be used. This would appear to be too restrictive and not in the interests of consumers. It could for instance mean that families need to order (and incur the cost of) two taxis to undertake a trip which previously only required one. Any measure that could incur additional costs for consumers will have a greater impact on disabled and older passengers.

*Q15: Do you agree with these proposed requirements for the steps to be used by Taxis?*

Whilst Imtac broadly agrees with the proposed requirements for steps listed in the consultation we believe more consideration is required on this issue and should be linked to broader accessibility requirements for vehicles. For example the list of requirements does not include a minimum step height for vehicles or minimum treads for the steps. Both are crucial for the safety of all passengers and for older and disabled passengers in particular. Well designed handrails can assist in minimising the difficulties caused by steps and there are clear benefits in considering the specifications for steps as part of the overall specifications for taxis.

*Q16: Do you agree that the requirement for upholstery should be expanded to cover all Taxis and to require cushioned upholstery?*

The Committee would appreciate clarification on what the new requirement for cushioned upholstery will actually entail before reaching a definitive position on the proposal.

*Q17: Do you agree with the proposed expansion of the requirement for the four doors of a Taxi?*

Imtac is aware of some vehicles that offer access/egress for wheelchair chair users at the rear. There is therefore potential for such vehicles to have 5 doors. Consequently Imtac believes the requirement should be amended to make provision for a minimum of four doors.

*Q19: Do you agree with the 80 litres minimum carrying capacity proposed for all Taxis?*

*Q20: Do you agree that the carrying capacity should be separate from the carriage of passengers for safety reasons?*

Imtac agrees that the carrying capacity for luggage should be separate from passengers. The Committee does, however, have concerns that the proposed minimum carrying capacity is very small and inadequate for a variety of uses including the safe carriage of mobility aids and in certain cases assistance animals. Whilst we recognise the rationale for making the carrying capacity so low we are concerned that this may create difficulties for both consumers and operators in identifying the most suitable taxi for both individuals and journeys.

*Q21: Do you agree that Taximeters should not be mandatory in Taxis until the introduction of a maximum fare has been researched and, if necessary, introduced?*

Whilst Imtac understands the rationale for the proposal we have concerns about the potential impact on consumers of lifting the current price controls. In particular we are concerned that fares will rise in the interim period and this could specifically impact on disabled people who use a wheelchair.

On a specific issue relating to taximeters, the Committee would like the Department to clarify whether or not meters will generate receipts once the maximum fare is introduced. Imtac views such a system as essential in ensuring that passengers have confidence in the new fare structures.

*Q22: Do you agree with the proposal to remove the exemption for Taxis to use the required child restraints when an advanced booking is made and the Operator is informed of the need for the restraint?*

Whilst the Committee does not have any formal objections to the proposal, it does highlight the potential complexities of a regulatory system both for operators and more importantly consumers. A number of the proposed other changes (including vehicle specification and accessibility and fare regulation) will require the Department to undertake significant promotion to educate both consumers and operators. From the perspective of Imtac staff responsible for taking bookings have a particularly important role in ensuring passengers are matched with the correct vehicle/service.

*Q23: Do you agree that where Education Boards and registered charitable organisations assess individuals as suitable for the payment of petrol/mileage expenses but these individuals are not operating public service vehicles, the exemption should continue to apply?*

Imtac agrees with this proposal.

*Q24: Do you agree with the proposals that any vehicle seized would be returned to the owner on production of a valid Taxi Licence?*

*Q25: Do you agree with the proposal to allow for the return of vehicles which do not have a valid Taxi Licence at the time of seizure?*

*Q26: Do you agree with the suggested period of 14 days, after which the seized vehicle would be sold or destroyed?*

*Q27: Do you agree with the registered keeper having to pay all fees to cover the costs of retention and recovery prior to the vehicle being returned to them?*

Imtac is broadly supportive of increased enforcement powers for the Department.

## **Conclusion**

6 Imtac welcomes the opportunity to comment on the current consultation. Whilst the Committee remains broadly supportive of the Department's proposals for future taxi licensing in Northern Ireland we do believe that there needs to be significant further

discussion of the detail of some of the proposals. In particular Imtac would like to discuss issues around vehicle accessibility in more detail with the Department.

## **Contact us**

- 7 You can contact us about any aspect of this response or request it in an alternative format at:

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