

Northern Ireland Review of Taxi Regulation

Background

In November 2002, the Department of the Environment (DOE) launched a comprehensive and wide-ranging review into how taxi services in Northern Ireland could be better regulated. It was initiated in response to concerns from the taxi industry and other stakeholders about how services operate under existing legislative and operational controls.

The following main problem areas were identified:

- the extent of illegal taxi activity involving unlicensed, uninsured drivers and vehicles
- the availability of too few taxis that are accessible to older people and people with disabilities, and other barriers these groups face when they want to use taxi services
- the absence of appropriate specific requirements for the training and testing of taxi drivers
- under-provision of taxi services at peak times at night for the travelling public generally
- lack of a clear distinction between 'public hire' and 'private hire' taxis, and the link between this and the practice of illegal plying by private hire taxis
- the need for better compliance and, where compliance is not achieved, more extensive and effective enforcement

The objective of the 'Taxi Review' was to make recommendations aimed at creating a more effective and equitable regulatory framework that promotes road and public safety, improves accessibility and facilitates fair competition in the taxi industry.

It was to address the structure of the taxi licensing system; how taxi drivers, vehicles and operators are licensed; and regulate taxi fares and using taximeters.

Approach

A DOE internal Taxi Review team worked closely from the outset with the Department's own agencies, Driver and Vehicle Licensing Northern Ireland (DVLNI) and the Driver and Vehicle Testing Agency (DVTA). Working groups were set up with key external stakeholder working groups including the Transport Advisory Committee of Disability Action (TAC) [now IMTAC – the Inclusive Mobility and Transport Advisory Committee] and the General Consumer Council. Meetings were also held at an early stage with many other organisations with an interest in delivering or using taxi services including all known taxi associations and other groups representing the taxi industry.

The Review team looked in detail at existing taxi legislation, policy and procedures in Northern Ireland. To gather evidence about how services are

currently being provided, it commissioned large scale surveys of taxi users, drivers and operators. The Review also investigated how taxis are regulated in the rest of the UK where there are approximately 350 different taxi licensing authorities each applying different licensing policies and conditions. It also drew on the experience of other countries which have recently reformed their taxi regulation systems, including the Republic of Ireland and the Netherlands.

The team consulted at four key stages in the policy development process:

- informally with a small group of key stakeholders on the Review Terms of Reference (November 2002)
- with all key stakeholders on an Initial Draft Proposals Discussion Paper (August 2003)
- public consultation on detailed policy proposals for the reform of taxi regulation (March 2005)
- public consultation on proposals for a draft Taxis (Northern Ireland) Order to give effect to those proposals as revised following consultation (August 2006).

Innovative and/or particularly effective consultation approaches included:

- carrying out consultation focus groups with taxi users including those with disabilities (the latter facilitated by IMTAC)
- sending postcards to all approximately 17,000 licensed taxi drivers telling them about the launch of the legislation consultation and how to get copies of the documents
- providing an 'Information Note' with the draft Taxis Order and the Explanatory Memorandum, to explain what the legislation was about and how the Department proposes to use the powers it will give.

Outcomes

Most of the policy proposals were widely welcomed and recognised as a means of both effectively tackling illegal taxi activity and of professionalising the industry in order to improve standards, and safety and consumer protection for taxi users. Measures to introduce taxi operator licensing, wider application of fare regulation and taximeters, and new driver testing and training requirements, were all strongly supported. In fact the majority of respondents urged the Department to go further by applying these measures more widely than it itself had proposed.

Taking those consultation responses into account the draft Taxis Order will enable the Department to bring in a range of innovative and radical measures designed to improve the standard of taxi services, reduce illegal taxiing and improve compliance. These include the introduction of operator licensing for all taxi businesses within a single tier (public hire only) licensing system in which all taxis in mixed (accessible and non-accessible) fleets will be able to pick up on

the streets without a booking but will have to work to regulated fares and use taximeters.

Lessons Learned

- The need to assemble a team of the right size with the right mix of skills and experience.
- How essential is it from the outset to identify, and develop good relationships, with key stakeholders. It is also important to identify all of your stakeholder groups and how best to reach them.
- The importance of correctly assessing all your data collection and collation needs at the earliest possible stage and to estimate accurately the resources required to complete external research projects and surveys.
- Be prepared to move outside your policy 'comfort zone': if you need to be, be radical.
- Work hard at making your consultations inclusive and accessible – the effort you put in is more often than not repaid in the responses and ideas generated.

Summary of Key Features of Policy Process

This case study illustrates an outward approach to policy making built on a strong local evidence base. How these policies should be communicated to the public was integral to the policy development process. Throughout, consideration was given to their potential impacts on taxi service providers and the needs of taxi users affected by them.