

RESPONSE TO THE COUNCILS DEREGULATION PLAN 2005 – 2008

F.A.O. John Bulmer

In responding, very briefly, to the 'Hackney Carriage Vehicle Licences Deregulation Plan 2005 – 2008', I attempt to be helpful by making the following observations.

Overall, whilst the plan is titled a 'Deregulation Plan' and initially focuses on its aims to deregulate the Council's hackney carriages, it also places a significant emphasis on a broader 'review of the hackney carriage and private hire licensing conditions' and seeks to roll out a range of, what appear, quite stringent policy, that the Council hopes will ensure that quality standards and customer safety are improved.

The plan further seeks to be "consistent with government priorities and overall guidance", although I note that the reference, in the Statement of Accountability, is "in respect of hackney carriages" only and is unclear whether the plan as a whole seeks to achieve levels of consistency with government priorities and overall guidance.

Personally, while I am supportive of many of the plans aims and aspirations, I was left with the feeling that the plan seeks to create an unnecessarily harsh and complex environment with top down design that does little to engage with the industry, or to encourage development, where possible in partnership, to achieve those aims.

The following feeds back on one or two of the more practical issues that arise:-

- Vehicle Age –
Reducing the minimum age limit from 4 to 2 years is likely to:-
 - Reduce the fleets vehicle quality standards – operators seeking to register an additional or replacement vehicle to their fleet, may be forced, financially, to commit to a lower standard vehicle of 2 years old or less as opposed to a vehicle of a higher standard that is perhaps 3 or 4 years old.
 - Place additional financial burdens on operators – with the standard of vehicles improving alongside the accessibility requirements, the cost of purchasing vehicles is increasing. These increases are carried by the operator.
 - There appears little evidence to suggest that slightly older well maintained vehicles are any less suitable or acceptable to the passenger.

Upper age limit (hackney carriage). My copy of the plan is unclear regarding the upper age limit for hackney carriage vehicles. 10 years is suggested although other parts of the plan suggest that 7 years is recommended. Again recognising that a well maintained high standard vehicle has an operating life in excess of 7 years. Depreciating a vehicle that may cost around £30,000 over a 7 year period may place additional financial burden on the operator, when there is little evidence to suggest that the vehicle may not be fit for purpose. Couldn't poor standard vehicles be addressed through maintenance and safety checks.

The private hire licence conditions appear excessive and are simply a slightly amended version of the hackney carriage conditions. Amongst other things this seems to fail to recognise that the private hire sector contains intrinsic differences to the hackney carriage sector and vehicles by nature tend to be used for a much wider range of uses than hackney carriages.

Whilst the issues of identification are important I am unconvinced that stipulating red vehicles is the solution.

- When sourcing vehicles an operators focus should be about the suitability and standard of the vehicle not its colour. Where a matching colour is not part of the manufacturers livery options or a suitable second hand vehicle requires re-spraying, the additional cost could have a

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counter productive impact upon choice and encourage the operator to prioritise colour before all else.

- Other forms of vehicle branding are available including magnetic signage.
- Some potential customers prefer a lower profile in their choice of travel.

Permitting wheelchair loading through side doors only suggests little correlation with the vehicles available and the manufacturers / converters. High quality vehicles are currently promoted with both side or rear wheelchair loading positions and seating configurations to enable internal conferencing. I understand the safety issues attached to rear loading and the potential for a wheelchair user to be isolated at the absolute rear of a vehicle. However these issues could be addressed through safety and customer care training.

I am unclear what appendix 3 item 13 intends to achieve. It states that the rear seat shall accommodate not less than three persons?

Vehicle Maintenance

I am unclear regarding why new(er) vehicles require such draconian 3 times per year testing to MoT standards.

- It appears to imply (although I'm sure it is not the intention) that there is serious distrust in an operators responsibility to maintain safe and legal vehicles. It strikes me that it actually undermines trust.
- If a history of poor safety does exist is it not more appropriate to target offenders via random inspections than blanket target all operators.
- There are indicators that imply (although again I'm sure it is not the intention) that this is a revenue generator.
- Older vehicles may require more stringent testing.
- There may be an argument for emission testing.

Topographical Knowledge

I am led to believe that the 'knowledge' requirements for a private hire driver are equal to a hackney carriage driver. If so, due to the advance notice of the travel details, this appears, as the Best Practise Guidelines suggest, "unnecessarily burdensome".

Duration of Licences

These appear to allow for absolute minimums pretty well across the board. Again unnecessary.

Conclusion

I have unfortunately had little opportunity to study and fully compare the 'plan' against the 'guidelines'. It does however appear that the guidelines are primarily used to guide only the 'deregulation' element.

The above views tend to reflect only the negatives. In the main I support where the Council are coming from, I am just not sure that some of the mechanisms are necessary at the present time, if indeed at all.

In view of the Councils desire to encourage operators to sign up to a voluntary Code of Conduct, my initial view asks where the incentives are. Greater partnership working that engages operators would compliment this.

Many thanks for allowing me to comment on these proposals.

Tony Mills
Potential future operator.

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