



Northern Ireland
Assembly

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. A list of attendees is included at Appendix A.

CONTEXT

3. Stakeholders were organised into four working groups, each chaired by a member of the Committee, tasked with answering the following 4 questions:
 - What do you see as the problems around Belfast City Centre and what created these problems?
 - How do you feel these can be addressed and what has already been done to address the problems?
 - What impact will your proposed solutions have on each other?
 - What can be agreed and how can this be progressed?
4. Following each question, a spokesperson for each table provided feedback that was followed by open discussion by all in attendance. This also provided an opportunity to raise issues and concerns, and to seek clarification on particular points. This resulted in lively debate from the stakeholders and the Committee Members.

ISSUES RAISED

5. Issues arising and views expressed were wide and varied, and opinions were often contradictory dependent on the individuals' viewpoint. However, a number of key themes emerged and the Committee is of the view that these should form the basis for taking this issue forward. The following details the key points which arose from the discussions and feedback.

General Points

6. Concerns were expressed that relate to the use of private cars in the city. Those concerns included: accessibility to the City Centre is an issue for private car users, they are being pushed out of the city centre rather than being part of a shared space. Increased pedestrianisation, 20MPH speed limits and an increased number of bus lanes are resulting in a less accessible city for private cars. People feel that travelling in the city centre is frustrating and that it is very difficult to travel in the city without incurring penalty tickets.
7. Whilst accepting that the 20MPH speed limit is a pilot, there is a need to review its operating times to consider when it is most necessary and adds most benefit.
8. There should be a review of the blue badge system for disabled drivers to ensure that only those who need the badge receive it and to assist in the reduction of congestion in the city centre.
9. The business sector is aware of the problems it faces from online shopping and that out of town shopping is a more favoured option for shoppers than Belfast city centre. It feels that transport policy is not helping the situation.
10. In attempting to understand the issues, there is a need to differentiate between night-time and daytime economies, i.e. offices and shops during the working day versus restaurants and bars at night – some cities have night-time economy strategies. A view also expressed was that Belfast needs to become more leisure/recreation and residential centric with less of a reliance on shopping to attract visitors.

11. The lack of available kerb space, particularly as a result of the additional bus lanes, will have implications on disabled vehicle users, deliveries to businesses and parking. The taxi rank at Donegal Square North also causes problems for disabled vehicle users and deliveries to nearby businesses; this rank needs to be urgently addressed.
12. The extension of disability action transport to allow public hire taxis to bid for contracts as a more cost effective means of providing transport was discussed and IMTAC would support the diversification of public hire taxi usage in this regard.

Bus lanes

13. Car park use in the city centre has increased, yet through-traffic has decreased and perhaps this is evidence that the bus lanes are serving their intended purpose. The Department commented that footfall has increased since the introduction of the bus lanes but the baseline for this claim was questioned and it was suggested that the increase may not be as a result of bus lanes, but more as a result in an upturn in the economy. Use of buses has increased by 100,000 passenger journeys on the Newtownards Road corridor since the introduction of the lanes; the Department rightly stated that a public transport system cannot operate effectively without bus lanes.
14. Taxi drivers are required to take part in bus lane training as part of their 7 hours of mandatory training per year and this will help increase their knowledge and understanding of the operation of the bus lanes.
15. Tourism is essential to the life on any city and one view expressed was that the bus lanes add confusion to the experience of visitors to the city. Confusion around access to bus lanes, including access times, has also resulted in an excessive number of fines.
16. It was felt by many that the operating times for bus lanes should be flexible, particularly during off-peak times. A suggestion was made that we need tidal flow bus lanes or that main routes should alternate between bus lanes and car corridors.

17. Buses need to be given priority in the bus lanes – taxis using them should take care to ensure that they do not block the lanes as to do so is contrary to the purpose of the lanes and will have significant implications on the Belfast Rapid Transit system. The current start-stop nature of the lanes, with little free-flowing for buses needs to be addressed.

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.

Cycling

32. The view expressed by some in attendance was that the cycling lobby is getting more traction than it should and there needs to be a balance, it was also stated that cyclists need to better adhere to the rules of the road; some would argue that the increased impact of cycling is addressing the imbalance in the direction of more sustainable transport solutions. Some also expressed the view, in terms of sustainable transport, that there needs to be a shift of mindset in favour cycling that could be achieved by extending the cycle hire scheme into other areas beyond the city centre.

33. A view expressed was that the bus lanes are not effective or a deterrent and are under-utilised and some felt that they should be available to all types of buses, taxis and cycles. Cyclists, however, feel that the current bus lanes are safer and more secure for them but an increase in traffic from private hire taxis would reduce this.

Park and Ride

34. Park and ride operational hours have been extended and there is a need to promote their use. The facility at Dundonald is well used whereas others are not and more needs to be done to raise awareness and to increase their usage.

Private Car Parking

35. The provision of free car parking in November and December leads to a high demand for parking, but the supply does not match this demand which results in motorists driving around searching for spaces; this leads to congestion at an already busy time of

year. This searching for free parking contradicts the fact that, as evidenced by the Department and Belfast City Council, there is an oversupply of parking in the city.

36. Increased residential accommodation, particularly student accommodation, does not have adequate parking facilities and this has created a parking issues.

37. The Committee would welcome views on the suggestion that a car parking strategy is required.

Coaches

38. Parking of coaches visiting from Europe presents a health and safety risk as the doors are on the opposite side of the vehicle and this is something that needs to be considered as part of Belfast City Council's review of coach drop-off and pick-up points.

Points agreed

39. It was agreed that behind all of the issues and concerns is the fact that the consumers' needs are paramount. For this reason, their ability to choose their preferred form of transport is essential. It is essential to get the balance right between all forms of transport to ensure the best for the city.

40. Public transport in Belfast city centre is complex with different providers competing rather than working together - a more joined up approach is necessary and there is a need for more compromise and flexibility from all involved. Whilst public hire and private hire taxis compete on a business level, and such competition is important, there is a need for both to work together in order to remain sustainable as the needs of customers using the city centre change.

41. There is a need to review the pilot of the 20MPH speed limits in the city centre, including its operating times and also to review the blue badge system in terms of assisting to address traffic congestion.

42. The taxi rank at Donegal Square North causes safety and access concerns and needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency.
43. There is a need for a robust validation of the claim that footfall in the city centre has increased as a result of the introduction of the bus lanes, and the Committee would welcome the output from that assessment.
44. Belfast City Council has formally requested that the Department reviews its bus lanes policy and the Committee looks forward to seeing the outcome of this review.
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.

52. There needs to be increased connectivity between different forms of public transport.

53. Enforcement is complicated and resource intensive but is an essential element of providing a system that serves the needs of its users.

54. There needs to be greater promotion of park and ride services.

55. A Committee requests the Department's view on the introduction of a parking strategy.

56. There is a need to assess and take on board what has been done in other similar sized cities.

57. There needs to be a joined up approach across Government, which includes all affected stakeholders, to solving the problems. Government and stakeholders needs to stop thinking with a silo mentality.

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.

61. Consideration should be given to providing cross-city bus routes to free up bus spaces in the city centre.

62. There is a need to look to the future and what the city's transport needs will be.

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 of the Assembly's website.

Stakeholder List

Name	Organisation
Ms Eve Bremner	Belfast City Council
Cllr Emmet McDonough-Brown	Belfast City Council
Ms Briega Coyle	Belfast City Council
Mr Alan Davison	Federation of Passenger Transport
Mr Gerry Diver	Belfast Public Hire Taxis
Mr Ciaran Doherty	Translink
Mr Roy Gordon	Transport NI
Insp. Darren Hardy	PSNI
Insp. Rosemary Leech	PSNI
Mr Michael Lorimer	IMTAC
Ms Karen Magill	Federation of Passenger Transport
Mr Pat Meighan	Belfast Public
Mr Gordon McAvoy	Belfast Chamber of Commerce
Mr William McCausland	Belfast Private Hire Taxis
Mr Stephen McCausland	Belfast Private Hire Taxis
Mr Christopher McCausland	Belfast Private Hire Taxis
Mr Sean McConnell	Transport NI
Mr Max O'Brien	IMTAC
Mr Rajesh Rana	Belfast Chamber of Trade and Commerce
Mr Kieran Reilly	Public Hire Taxis
Ms Nikki Thompson	PSNI
Mr Robin Totten	Department for Regional Development