

Written Ministerial Statement

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Department for Infrastructure

TAXI LICENSING REGULATIONS

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Ms Mallon (The Minister for Infrastructure):

The outbreak of covid-19 has caused significant challenges and changes in our daily lives. No sector or individual is untouched by the scale of the pandemic. I am grateful to members and to the public for their support and patience while my department has been working tirelessly to find solutions for our communities.

I have previously advised Members and the public of a range of measures which I have put in place to exempt various types of vehicles from needing an MOT test so that people can stay on the road when they need to make essential travel journeys during this current emergency. These exemptions were needed due to the closure of MOT centres in order to prevent the spread of COVID-19 for customers and staff.

However, finding a means to exempt taxis from PSV tests has been more difficult and has required a temporary change to regulations which has now been put in place. I can confirm that the Taxi Licensing (Amendment) (Coronavirus) Regulations (Northern Ireland) become operational today.

The Regulations deal with taxi vehicle licences which expire during the current emergency. They provide for the automatic renewal of these licences – without prior testing. This will ensure that these vehicles can remain on the road during this period.

Licences that are renewed in this way will last for a 6 month period, and will be issued free of charge. They will be subject to a number of conditions. These largely require owners and drivers to follow statutory requirements and keep their vehicles in a roadworthy condition – or risk revocation of their licence. However these are not new conditions, they have always been in place.

In order to minimise administration for everyone, taxi drivers and operators will not need to apply for their new licences. My Department will issue automatically a 6 month licence - free of charge - for all vehicles whose licence is due to expire between 10 March 2020 and 9 October 2020, unless appointments can be put back in place earlier. This is a temporary measure reflecting the exceptionally challenging times of this current pandemic.

We will prioritise those licences that have recently expired or are due to expire shortly. However I aim to have all the licences dispatched within the next few weeks. This will mean that the majority of licence holders will receive their 6 month licence well in advance of the expiry date of their current licence.

I am pleased to be able to report positive progress on this complex issue which I know has been of significant concern to the taxi industry. While my responsibility for taxis only extends to the regulation of the industry, I am very aware of the increasing financial hardship this crisis is creating; with my Executive colleagues I pushed hard to secure the self-employed financial package announced by the British Government recently. This will go some way to helping self-employed people, like those within the taxi industry, but in my view the package falls short in a number of respects and with Executive colleagues, I will continue to press for more assistance.

I also know that social distancing is a real concern and a challenge for those taxi drivers continuing to provide a service to the public. I have therefore been engaging with the Minister for Economy on this issue. The Department for Economy as the responsible Department on this issue has assured me that guidance on social distancing for taxi drivers is being prepared as quickly as possible. In my view this guidance is vital for drivers and customers to ensure health and safety is maintained as a priority at this time.

I wish to assure Members that I have been engaging with the taxi industry and recently wrote an open letter to taxi drivers to update them on my efforts to find a means of support for them.

With the numbers of taxi journeys greatly reducing, there is also now a real opportunity for taxi drivers to explore how they can play their part in taking the pressure off our vital services by helping the most vulnerable in our communities. To look at, for example, opportunities for delivering food, medicines and other vital supplies or to get patients to essential appointments. To help progress this, I have raised this with Executive colleagues to examine how taxis can be re-purposed to support the emergency efforts. The Department for Communities as the lead Department is working with my officials and local government to explore how this can be done.

Driving Licences – medicals

It has not been possible to resolve everything today. I am also very aware that a number of drivers are required to submit a medical report before a new taxi driver's licence can be granted, when applying for renewal of their taxi driver's licence. The COVID-19 situation means that it is increasingly difficult to gain access to a medical professional, given that healthcare resources are rightly being focussed on fighting the pandemic. Whilst some licences which require medical assessments are being processed, I am aware that this is not the case for everyone.

This issue is not restricted to taxi drivers – it also extends to bus and lorry drivers. A similar problem exists in Great Britain, and my staff are working urgently with colleagues in the Department for Transport to identify a possible way forward. I want to assure Members and the industry that my Department is focused on finding a solution to this issue and if it proves necessary to amend legislation locally, I will seek to do this and will provide an update as soon as possible.

Essential Travel

In all that I am doing, I am seeking to maintain connectivity and support key workers, such as our heroic nurses and doctors, to get to their work. I am mindful however that not all travel is essential and therefore solutions need to be put in place which focus on keeping vehicles on the road, safely and where it is essential to do so in the current emergency. I want to put on record my appreciation to my officials for all their hard work in responding to this crisis and finding solutions to the new challenges this crisis presents. I assure Members we will continue to play our part in working with others to fight back against COVID 19.