



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Infrastructure

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Taxi Operators Licensing Regulations
(Northern Ireland) 2012: Department for
Infrastructure

1 May 2024

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mrs Deborah Erskine (Chairperson)
Mr John Stewart (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Danny Baker
Mr Cathal Boylan
Mr Keith Buchanan
Mr Mark Durkan
Mr Peter McReynolds

Witnesses:

Mrs Dorcas Cutrona	Department for Infrastructure
Dr Chris Hughes	Department for Infrastructure
Mr Stephen Spratt	Department for Infrastructure
Mr Donald Starritt	Department for Infrastructure

The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine): We now have an evidence session with the Department for Infrastructure on the review of the Taxi Operators Licensing Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012. The relevant papers are in Committee members' packs.

It is great to have some familiar faces join us again. I welcome to the Committee Dr Chris Hughes, who is the director of the safe and accessible travel division in DFI; Dorcas Cutrona and Donald Starritt, who are also from the safe and accessible travel division; and Stephen Spratt, from Driver and Vehicle Agency (DVA) enforcement. Thank you for joining us today. We are grateful that you have taken the time to come to the Committee to provide us with information and evidence. We have the paper that was provided to the Committee, so, if you do not mind, please take a few minutes to give us a brief overview, after which members will ask questions. I will let you talk.

Dr Chris Hughes (Department for Infrastructure): Chair and members, thank you for the opportunity to provide a briefing to the Committee. I will introduce the team. Dorcas looks after the taxi team day-to-day. Donald looks after legislation across the division. Stephen is from the DVA. I will dampen your enthusiasm, however, by telling you that he has nothing to do with MOTs, so he will not be able to answer any questions of that nature. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Durkan: That is sorted now.

Mr Boylan: That was to be the main focus of the meeting.

Dr Hughes: We therefore do all that. I do not intend to say anything extensive, so we can move quickly to taking questions, but what I will say is that DFI's taxi role is to provide regulation. We make sure that the operator that you contact to book a taxi is properly licensed; that the vehicle that appears at the door has been checked and is of the correct standard; that the driver is suitably qualified; and that the fare that you pay when you exit the vehicle is regulated. We cannot control the economic cycle or reserved matters, such as taxation. There are factors within which the taxi sector operates that are outside our control. There are clear parameters. We are important and impactful players, but we are not the only ones.

That is all that I have to say. We are now happy to take questions.

The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine): That is perfect. Thank you very much. You will be aware that some of the taxi operators appeared before the Committee recently and gave us details of the communication that the Department had sent them. At a basic level, the Committee was made aware that nothing was imminently forthcoming. I take it that that is still the case. Will you chat about some of that?

Dr Hughes: I will ask Donald to speak about that.

Mr Donald Starritt (Department for Infrastructure): Do you mean regulations being introduced?

The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine): Yes, and any changes to the legislation or any updated legislation, if that makes sense.

Mr Starritt: That is grand. The immediate issue has been the Uber judgement and subsequent rulings on it. The Committee is already aware of that. If it is helpful, I will provide a bit of background on it.

The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine): Yes.

Mr Starritt: The case was brought by Uber workers, who made the argument that they were workers rather than self-employed and, as such, were entitled to certain workers' rights. The case made its way as far as the Supreme Court, and subsequent judgements flowed from it. Ultimately, the courts decided that the drivers were workers. That was primarily because of the level of control that Uber exerted over what they did. In other words, drivers were not entirely free to make their own decisions.

Out of that came the issue of whether taxi fares should be subject to VAT. The decision was taken, from looking at the legislation, that taxi operators were in contract with their passengers, that a contract was in place and that that contract had the potential to alter the VAT situation. As I said, that decision was taken initially in the Uber case, based on the legislation that functioned in London. Subsequently, courts have found that it is likely to be the same situation across England and Wales. Indeed, although it has not gone to court yet, the advice that we have received is that the Taxis Act (Northern Ireland) 2008 is on the same level. In other words, across the UK, there is similarity in the primary legislation that covers taxis. To boil that down, the 2008 Act therefore provides for a contract between the operator and the passenger, meaning that the operator effectively works under that contract.

As you know, the Department has written to taxi operators about its proposal to change the legislation. Were we to introduce regulations, they would simply clarify what the Taxis Act already provides for. We cannot make regulations that change that, because the regulations are subordinate to the Act. The only thing that regulations can do is implement the Act or clarify its requirements. In this case, we would be clarifying the requirements of the Act. As the Committee probably knows, however, the Treasury has launched a VAT consultation. That has been done to try to understand the impact on the taxi industry of the court rulings and to consider possible ways in which to mitigate that impact. With that in mind, the Minister, having considered the fact that the consultation is under way, has decided not to introduce regulations at this point. Sorry for this being long-winded. The one thing that I will say about that is that, even though we are not introducing regulations, that does not alter the fact that the Taxis Act is already in place and provides for the contract between operator and passenger. I think that the Department will therefore be encouraging concerned operators — we understand that concern — to take their own legal advice. What we are effectively saying is that the issue flows from the decision of the courts rather than from any decision taken by the Department.

The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine): That is useful. Thank you for that, as it provides a bit of clarity. What proportion of drivers does the Department estimate was aware of the proposed changes arising from that communication? Can you talk about how the communication found its way to drivers not aligned with taxi operators? How many drivers will have become aware of the proposed changes from that communication?

Mrs Dorcas Cutrona (Department for Infrastructure): The DVA issued the information notice through its licensing system, and it went out to all taxi operators that are registered with it. The proposed changes have a bigger impact on operators, but they were to be circulated to their employees as well.

Dr Hughes: Moreover, there are no taxi drivers who are not affiliated to an operator. Anyone driving a taxi needs to be affiliated to an operator, so that independent driver does not exist.

Mr Starritt: There are a number of driver-operators, who are one-man bands, so to speak.

Dr Hughes: They are registered as an operator on the DVA system, however, so they will have received it.

The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine): They will have got that.

Dr Hughes: Every driver is affiliated to an operator, and all operators were communicated with and then asked to distribute the information to anybody affiliated to them.

The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine): Does that include the likes of Uber?

Dr Hughes: Yes.

Mrs Cutrona: Any operator that has a licence that is on the DVA records will have received it. I checked with the DVA twice that it sent out the communication, and it confirmed to me that it had.

Mr Starritt: It is possible in some cases that it may take a while to filter through, because the DVA will be reliant on the information with which it has been provided. If that information becomes out of date or whatever, it could take longer.

The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine): Do you have any exact figures for how many operators the communication went out to?

Mrs Cutrona: In quarter 3, it had it gone out to 1,123 operators.

The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine): Finally, I have a question on the VAT element. What assessment has the Department done of the potential impact of VAT on the sector, particularly on smaller operators? That concern has been raised at the Committee.

Mr Starritt: We are not really in a position to do that, because, to be honest, even Treasury is still trying to understand the implications. VAT will vary according to operating models, because the Department does not mandate a particular operating model for the industry. It will therefore vary according to the model. We are aware that the VAT threshold is £90,000. Although VAT fell to drivers for the most part, the vast majority of them will have fallen below the VAT threshold. We are aware that things will change, but, as I said, it is not something on which we have any information. The Department and the Minister are very happy to look at any ways in which to mitigate that, but it is something that was not of the Department's making. Likewise, in Britain, it stemmed from the court ruling about the VAT implications and about where the contract lay.

The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine): Has the Department looked at any ways in which to mitigate some of that, such as seeking through legislation to move the contract from the operator and passenger to the driver and passenger in order to avoid VAT?

Mr Starritt: A key issue is that the operators have a particular system that the drivers implement for them. Were that to be radically changed, we would need to be in a position in which those drivers were totally self-employed and therefore not controlled by an operator. Whether operators would be

content with that scenario is another matter, because it has implications for, for example, the fares that operators charge. At the moment, an operator sets the fare structure, and it would need to relinquish doing that. That is just one example. If, following the court ruling, for the purpose of the contract, the driver were to be viewed as purely self-employed, that would have major implications for the operating models. That is why we are saying to the operators that they need to seek legal advice on their operating model, because that is not mandated by the Department.

Dr Hughes: Further to your question, Chair, the issue is that, as you are well aware, tax is a reserved matter, so it is a matter for Treasury and HMRC. They control it. There are no options available to the taxi team in DFI to address reserved matters of taxation, because that is not something that the system is set up to do. Tax is reserved and therefore a HMRC matter. Donald set out the courts' views and decisions, along with what the changes might look like, but it is ultimately a Treasury and HMRC matter that the courts in GB have ruled on. Those are the larger forces at work.

The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine): I will ask a quick supplementary question on that before I bring in members. We know that it is a reserved matter — thank you for pointing that out — but has the Department had substantive engagement and discussions with Treasury, or other relevant Whitehall Departments, on the issue?

Mrs Cutrona: There has been very limited engagement. As Chris said, Treasury and the Department for Transport in GB lead on it, and they really just notified us when the consultation went live and asked us to forward the information to operators and encourage them to feed back through the consultation.

Dr Hughes: It is an employment matter, so we have just this week drawn the issue to the attention of the Department for the Economy in order to make it aware that there is an issue in Northern Ireland.

The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine): OK.

Mr Stewart: Thanks very much for coming to the Committee and for your answers so far. First, I will follow up on the VAT point. You said that a consultation had gone live and that information on it had been disseminated to taxi operators, but, three weeks ago, we heard from the Licensed Taxi Operators Association (LTOA) about the real and stark impact that the change could have on the sector here. I took from that the impression that the bigger firms will probably get bigger but that operators will probably have to move to a cashless system, which would be deeply concerning, particularly for the elderly and vulnerable who do not have that facility. Outside of the major companies in major cities, smaller firms said that they would not be able to take that on. Its impact would be vast, resulting in fewer operators in Northern Ireland, with fewer taxis, as a result. With that in mind, does the Department plan to respond to the consultation, seeking evidence from taxi operators here, in order to make that point? The impacts could be even more stark here than they would be elsewhere in the United Kingdom.

Dr Hughes: It is for operators to voice their view and to —.

Mr Stewart: I appreciate that, but does the Department plan to respond?

Dr Hughes: We had not —.

Mrs Cutrona: We were just asked to make our local operators aware of the consultation and to encourage them to draw out any issues in responding to it.

Dr Hughes: In a lot of what you have described are matters of employment practice and law. As I said at the outset, those are not our areas. Our role is to regulate the taxi that appears at your door, the driver in it and how it was booked. There are forces at work much larger than those on which we are able to have an impact.

Mr Stewart: Is the Department as a whole not concerned about the impact on the number of operators that we have, and, as a result of that concern, should it not have a plan? If the Department could come up with a coordinated, joint response to submit to the Treasury and His Majesty's Government, that would carry a lot more weight than a response from single operators. Is that not being considered?

Dr Hughes: At this stage, we have drawn attention to it. We could certainly have a look at whether that would be appropriate. The issues tend to concern employment law, so I would need to have a think about whether we could make that point in a constructive and meaningful way. I do not know. Within the parameters that we work, issues that you described, such as having cashless taxis, are very much a matter for the operators and businesses themselves. Those are real issues. To be clear, we want to make things as easy as possible for operators to operate within, and we want as many of them as possible to be functioning well. That is absolutely what we want to do. We want play our part in that. We are 100% on that page.

We are therefore not doing anything in our gift that will cause any problems to the operating model. A lot of this stuff is subject to the larger forces of the economy, HM Treasury and employment law. Those are the factors that really seem to be having an impact. I want to be clear about that.

Mr Starritt: As Chris said, it is just this week that we made contact with staff in the Department for the Economy. They were aware of the issue. It is possible that, through further engagement, other actions may emerge from that process, but that is too early to gauge at the moment.

Dr Hughes: It is. It is a developing situation, so we let people know this week. It is incredibly helpful for the businesses to alert Treasury and make their case. We encourage that, because it is their views that Treasury is seeking. We are helping them with that as much as we can.

Mr Stewart: I will move on. We have heard that the number of taxis on the roads has reduced significantly. One of the major concerns is over accessible taxis — taxis with wheelchair access and so on — which now represent less than 5% of taxis, and that figure seems to be dwindling year-on-year. What is the Department's view on that? In your eyes, what more could be done to get more acceptably accessible vehicles on the roads?

Mrs Cutrona: There are currently 350 wheelchair-accessible taxis across Northern Ireland. I agree that the numbers have been decreasing. We are aware of that, but, under the current legislation, the Department does not have any kind of input into that. It is at the discretion of operators how many wheelchair-accessible taxis are in their fleet. My team recently had a meeting with the Inclusive Mobility and Transport Advisory Committee (IMTAC) and Disability Action. We have regular engagement with those stakeholders and their disability groups and encourage them to engage with operators and to pass on their issues, because what the Department can do, practically, is done through the licensing process. We cannot force operators to have wheelchair-accessible taxis.

Mr Stewart: I appreciate that, and I am glad that you share my concerns. I am concerned about the stage that it would have to get to before somebody would have to step in and try to force operators' hand. Realistically, to have 350 fully accessible taxis to cover the whole country amounts to almost nothing.

Dr Hughes: That would be a political decision.

Mr Stewart: There is a section 75 impact. People need access to taxis, yet they cannot get such taxis. At what stage do you think that something may need to be done to try to incentivise operators at least to have a certain percentage of taxis that have full accessibility?

Dr Hughes: That would be a political decision.

Mr Stewart: A ministerial decision?

Dr Hughes: I think that it would be a political decision. If the Committee were to want to alter the current arrangements in order to make that a requirement, that would absolutely be a political decision.

Mr Stewart: I promise that this is my last question, Chair. From speaking to drivers, whether they are seeking to come in as a new taxi driver or are going through the testing process again, I regularly hear that the taxi driver practical test and the rest of the process for becoming a taxi driver is not only laborious but expensive and not fit for purpose. I am keen to get your take on the process. Are there any plans to amend it by taking on board the advice and feedback that you get from drivers? I appreciate that some of the bigger firms are now running academies to get people through the process, but the fact that they have had to employ people to take new drivers through it gives you

some idea of how laborious the process is. Where firms are doing that, there has been some success, but, where that is not happening, people just give up. I am interested to hear your thoughts on that.

Dr Hughes: I will provide a bit of background. The taxi driver theory test was introduced in 2014, and the idea was to professionalise the sector. At that stage, a lot of people had taxi licences. The move was welcomed by the sector, and the drivers were very keen to see it introduced in order to professionalise the sector. It was anticipated that, as time went on, those who were driving more casually could, when there was a downturn in the economy and their job was not providing as many hours, supplement their income by doing some taxi work. Drivers who were taxiing as a full-time job were very keen to see the professionalisation of the sector. That brought it into line with other driving jobs.

For example, a similar approach is taken for HGV and bus drivers. The driving test is set at what is called a level 2-standard qualification, with which some of you may be familiar. Level 2 is an internationally recognised standard, and it has currency in the workplace. For example, if a pupil gets a C at GCSE, that is a level 2 qualification. If a pupil gets a D or below at GCSE, that is a level 1 qualification. In the workplace, employers are looking for level 2 qualifications. Five GCSEs, including English and maths, are needed in order to join most workplaces. Level 2 is therefore the standard at which this is pitched. The tests for bus drivers and HGV drivers are pitched at level 2, and the taxi driver theory test is a level 2 qualification as well. It is therefore at exactly the same level.

The taxi driver theory test, however, has a lower pass mark than those other tests, which is taking down the level. A number of changes have been made to the test over the years in response to concerns that have been raised. For example, to pass the test for cars and bikes, 86% is needed. For bus drivers, lorry drivers and driving instructors, 85% is needed. For a taxi driver, 80% is needed, which keeps it at level 2, but it is still sitting at that lower level.

There are four parts to the theory test, and, in December 2017, the pass mark for each bit was reduced to 18 out of 25. People have to score higher than that, however, in order to reach 80% and display the required level of competence. The percentage for each part was reduced from 19, while it is 20 for tests for other types of drivers. In September 2018, the pass mark for the hazard perception element of the test was reduced from 57 to 50 out of a possible 75. On nidirect, there are now practice papers and online tests. There is improved preparation material, and a voice-over in other languages has been added for those who do not have English as a first language, while an English voice-over is provided for those who struggle with the reading aspect of the test. In September 2022, the material was reviewed and updated, and candidates who fail the test now have enhanced signposting to tell them exactly which aspects they need to get up on, because those will have been the aspects on which they failed.

On the Department's side, an immense amount of work has been done over quite a few years to make the test as accessible as possible. The key is that it is at a level 2 standard. It has to be at that standard. A level 2 test tests candidates' depth and breadth of knowledge. That is what the test does, as it does in the tests for HGV and other drivers. The simple, honest answer is that test applicants tend to fail on the knowledge-based bits of the test, which are to do with the Highway Code and on interacting with customers. Although the material is available online, people doing the test do not reproduce it in test conditions and do not demonstrate an understanding of the requirements of the job and of what is required in order to get a taxi licence. They are therefore not meeting the standard. The adverts that are run demonstrate that, with more preparation, people can achieve the standard.

In a former role, I encouraged pupils to get good GCSEs, including English and maths. If a pupil got a D in GCSE maths, I would say, "That's great, because you're very close. Go away and study a bit more now to get the standard". It is about the preparation. We have done a lot, listened over a number of years and responded, but we also have to be custodians of the fact that it is an internationally recognised standard that needs to be comparable with that for other driving jobs.

Mr Stewart: OK, thank you very much.

The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine): Thank you for that clarity.

Mr Boylan: You are welcome back. Now that John has seen my notes, I will have to go in a different direction. *[Laughter.]* Thanks very much for that, John.

Last year, a maximum tariff was introduced, and the Department stated that that decision was taken in the context of challenges with the availability of taxis, particularly in the evenings and at weekends. Has the division assessed the industry following that change?

Mrs Cutrona: Are you talking about the higher rate in the evenings?

Mr Boylan: Yes.

Mrs Cutrona: We have no statistics on that. However, anecdotal evidence suggests that there are more drivers in the evenings. The feedback that we have received from some operators is that they have up to 30% more drivers available at weekends and in the evenings, particularly at weekends.

Mr Boylan: Will you be able to monitor that? Are you saying that it is working on the ground? Are there any other challenges?

Mrs Cutrona: I work in the policy section, so there is no statistical means of monitoring that. Through our engagement with the taxi industry, we just ask.

Dr Hughes: It has been only five months.

Mr Boylan: I understand that.

Dr Hughes: It is a question that has come up before and it is a legitimate one, and I absolutely understand —.

Mr Boylan: It was raised as part of the conversation —.

Dr Hughes: Yes. We do not deploy people on a Friday or Saturday night to see what the situation is. We get feedback, and, as members, you will get feedback on issues like that through your offices. We listen to that feedback, but we do not go out and monitor the situation.

Mr Boylan: It was raised in the conversation that we had with the industry.

The other point that I want to raise is about class C taxis. I definitely need you to elaborate on that. The division stated that class C is being used in a way that was not originally intended. Will you comment on that? How is Uber regulated in other jurisdictions? That issue rears its head in the conversation about class C. Will you elaborate a wee bit on that?

Mr Starritt: Yes, we are on record as saying that class C is not functioning as originally intended. The original intention was that class C would be for wedding cars, funeral cars, limousines and chauffeur-driven vehicles. Class C is described as:

"carrying passengers for hire or reward."

Class C taxis must be pre-booked. Uber is one of the companies that has gone into that sector, which was not the Department's original intention. However, in managing that situation now, whatever we do, if we do anything, we need to be mindful that there are roughly 1,500 vehicles in class C. Some of those are wedding cars, funeral cars etc but some are taxis that are working day and daily. Were we to come up with a solution, it would very much be a balancing act. Taxi numbers are already in decline, and we do not want to make that situation any worse. It is partly about understanding how serious and significant the issue is. We talked earlier about the regulations that the Department is bringing forward. We do not have any plans to amend class C.

Mr Boylan: Do you intend to have a conversation with the industry about that? The issue has been raised a number of times with a number of members.

Mr Starritt: Obviously, we have to take any criticism that we get from the industry. We are aware of the issue. We can feed back to the Minister any information that the Department receives, but in terms of action it is a very difficult balancing act. It would be better if we were not in that situation — of course it would — but we have to accept that there are a number of legitimate taxis that are currently

operating in class C. What would happen to those taxis if we forced them to move to another class? We need to understand that issue.

Mr Boylan: As part of the presentation that we received from the industry, we were shown a photo from two PSV applications for two different taxi classes. One passed the PSV test and the other failed. The presentation highlighted the different rules for different classes. Will you comment on that? I think it was to do with running boards and heights.

Mr Starritt: Again, that is an illustration of the fact that class C was there more for wedding and funeral cars and certain novelty vehicles. That is an issue because the dimension requirements are different for class C, which means that class C taxis are not subject to the same checks as taxis in other classes. We have to accept that. As a Department, we are not aware of that being a significant issue or problem. As was illustrated a couple of weeks ago, there is a small number of vehicles that are operating and, potentially, taxiing in class C that are not subject to exactly the same tests as vehicles in the other classes. We can look at that but we do not have figures to suggest that it is a significant issue.

Mr Boylan: Thank you very much.

Mr Baker: A lot of what I was going to say has been covered. I want to follow up on John's point about the 350 class B vehicles. How much of a decrease in the number of class B vehicles has there been over the past five years?

Mrs Cutrona: My figures only go back to 2019-2020, when there were 499 taxis in that class. In quarter 3 of 2023-24, that number was down to 350.

Mr Baker: Is there any indication as to why that has happened?

Mrs Cutrona: Wheelchair-accessible taxis are more expensive to buy, operate and run. It is probably that drivers are choosing not to buy those types of cars because they are more expensive to operate. Before 2017, those operators were allowed to charge a little bit extra for pick ups, but from 2017, under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995, everybody had to be charged the same: disabled people are not allowed to be charged any more than the able-bodied. The figures began to drop after that.

Dr Hughes: It takes longer to safely and respectfully load and unload certain people who use those taxis, such as wheelchair users. In those cases, the vehicle will be stopped at the beginning and the end of the journey for a longer period. We get that reported back to us by those operators that have wheelchair-accessible taxis.

Mr Baker: It is important for accessibility and inclusivity. How much of a decrease has there been in the number of taxis?

Mrs Cutrona: In all taxi classes?

Mr Baker: Yes, for taxis in the main. You said that there had been a 30% increase at night-time, but that depends on the number that were going into the town before that. I am just thinking about the night-time industry —.

Mrs Cutrona: I said that up to 30% more drivers are available at the weekends. Most of those drivers have class A taxis. Across Northern Ireland, there are 5,218 taxis in class A, but there are the 350 class B operators in there as well and, potentially, Uber. There are 1,497 class C taxis.

Mr Baker: What has the decrease been since 2019?

Dr Hughes: The start of 2022, which was at the back end of the COVID pandemic, was the low point for the number of taxi licences. There were 6,700 at the start of 2022. That has gone up to 7,100. Taxi vehicle licences had been steadily decreasing since 2019, but, over the past few quarters, there have been increases in the number of licensed taxis across all the classes.

Mr Baker: Do you know what the number was in, say, 2014, before the changes came in?

Mrs Cutrona: We do not have that number with us. I am not sure that our records go back that far.

Dr Hughes: There was an issue with how the records were kept. I can check, but our figures go back to the first quarter of 2019. There was definitely a drop.

The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine): It might be useful to get some of those pre-COVID figures. I know that you said that there might have been an issue with how some of that information was recorded, but it would be good to try to compare.

Dr Hughes: We can get some pre-COVID figures. They would not be over a long timescale, but we will certainly look at what we can produce.

Mrs Cutrona: DVA publishes the figures every quarter, and we have a table to hand. Those tables are on the DFI website and are easily accessible.

Dr Hughes: They are easy to find.

Mrs Cutrona: Yes.

Mr Baker: How far do they go back?

Mrs Cutrona: The ones that I have here go back to 2019-2020.

The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine): Given that they go back only to 2019, it might be useful to get some of the figures from before that, if we can.

Mr K Buchanan: Thanks for coming along. You are not going to get off the hook today, Stephen. *[Laughter.]* My question is about enforcement and illegal operators. A few weeks ago, the industry talked about — to be fair, it was very much a guesstimate — 25% of urban and possibly 40% to 50% of rural taxi operators being illegal. Will you give us an understanding of how you go about enforcement? How many people are on your team, and how often do you be out?

Mr Stephen Spratt (Department for Infrastructure): Surely. We are resourced at the moment for nine full-time dedicated and highly trained enforcement officers. Those officers can also be supported by up to 15 staff from other enforcement teams. That works extremely well, especially during the likes of the night-time economy, which is outside normal hours. We can bring those staff in to supplement the team.

Budgetary pressures remain a challenge, as is the case with every Department. For that reason, we have spent a lot of time thinking about innovative ways in which to try to improve what we do, what service we deliver and how we go about it. About six months ago, we decided to develop a piece of software — we call it "Street Hawk" — to provide officers with the ability to access really good, clean data on all vehicles so that they can tell the difference between a class C vehicle and a normal unlicensed car — there are no extremities on class C vehicles to say that they are taxis — and so that you can screen the vehicles and identify from a street level, no matter what provincial town it is, suspect taxis. We also retrofitted seven of our enforcement vehicles with new specialist lighting to make them look less utilitarian. Sirens are also being trialled on those vehicles. That means that we can step back from having to rely so much on the likes of the police to support some of those operations. That gives us more flexibility and makes us more agile in the way in which we go about it.

It is very difficult to gauge the pattern of illegal activity across the Province, including the rural versus urban picture. We define illegal taxis in three categories. The first is the totally unregulated taxi that operates in direct competition with the legitimate licensed sector. Such taxis may be driven by people who hold a taxi driver's licence but decide that they do not want the baggage of the other running costs. There may also be drivers in that category who have lost good repute and that type of thing. Then, there are social unregulated taxis. In fairness, they may have been borne out of COVID and the increase in the cost of living. We have young people, in particular, who offer taxi services at weekends for their friends and families. They may share the transport, with someone doing it every weekend. Remuneration is possible under the car-sharing rules, but unfortunately, there are a lot of people touting for business on social media.

There are also the regulated taxis that step outside the confines of the licensing regime. To pick up on some of the earlier threads of discussion, that practice often arises during the night-time and weekend economy. We have plenty of experience of drivers deciding to switch off their data heads, go independent and tout on the street. You are probably aware of the media reports of price-gouging in the run-up to Christmas and into the New Year and how it was totally unacceptable. When looking at such issues, we have an operational planning group meeting once a month, at which we look at all the information and set a strategic direction for what we need to do. We also have a service delivery group to look at how best to deliver that.

That is a flavour of how that happens. The key is the complaints that come into the system, and I will give you a flavour of what those look like in a second. We use a risk matrix: we have a team that looks at all that information and decides, on a scale of one to 10, how high a priority something is. I assure you that any taxis, whether regulated or unregulated, that pose an identifiable and immediate risk to the public or an immediate risk to road safety will be top of the pops in our response. Hopefully, that will give you some comfort.

We have teams that combine technical and non-technical staff to deal with infringements at the roadside. They can deal with roadworthiness and licensing, and we have over 50 fixed penalty tickets available to deal with the mire of offences that could arise in taxiing. In certain circumstances, we can report the more severe cases, with a view to prosecution, and seize vehicles that are an immediate risk. Of course, prosecution is the preserve of the most serious offences: we do not want to compound the criminal justice system with lower-level infringements.

I said that I would share some insight on complaints. In the 2022 calendar year, 102 complaints came into the section. Of those complaints, 59 were about potential illegal operators and 43 were about drivers from the regulated sector doing things that they should not have been doing. The total number of complaints dropped to 87 in 2023, of which 35 were about unregulated taxis and 52 were about the regulated sector. For the year up to March 2024, there have been 68 complaints, of which 28 were about unregulated taxis and 40 were about regulated taxis. Picking up on some of the discussion about our enforcement response, I can tell you that the preponderance of the 40 complaints related to price-gouging and were a response to the media pieces on that. We made a concerted effort to address that issue using the Street Hawk app and the new vehicles. From January to March, there was an increase of about 400% in the number of criminal offences dealt with due to the introduction of that innovative approach.

I am aware of a recent Assembly question for written answer on what the dynamic of that response looked like. It wanted to know how many operations were taking place in Belfast and whether Belfast was getting the preponderance of our attention. In 2022, there were 117 enforcement operations carried out. Of those, 76 were outside Belfast, and 41 were in Belfast. Some 124 enforcement operations were carried out in 2023, of which 77 were outside Belfast and 47 were in Belfast. From the start of this year to March, 40 operations were carried out, 20 of which were outside Belfast and 20 were in Belfast. I hope that that gives you a rough outline of what the dynamic looks like, what we do and how we deliver it.

Mr K Buchanan: I have a couple of quick questions. Going back to the 2022 figures, you received 102 complaints, if I am correct, 59 of which related to illegal taxis. Of those 59 reports of illegal taxis — obviously, they were only reports — how many did you investigate? How many of those are off the road and how many of them are on the road today?

Mr Spratt: I do not have those statistics.

Mr K Buchanan: In other words, what is your success rate?

Mr Spratt: Yes. The 59 complaints that came in were from a range of different areas and will have slightly different dynamics. Some of them will be incredibly difficult to investigate, especially those that involve social cars that are used by families and friends. Our authority to go in, look under the radar and do all the more murky stuff becomes a challenge. We need to be proportionate in what we do and demonstrate that we have stopped those people, engaged with them and gone through the rigours of the process. I do not have an overall picture, but during 2022 six vehicles that were an immediate risk to public safety were seized. We can seize unlicensed taxis, but we do not seize them all. If people have allowed their licences to lapse, their vehicles can be seized. For people who are partially compliant and do not have a public service vehicle licence, we will not obstruct the process. A

judgement call is made as to when and where we seize vehicles. Some of those cases will come before the court shortly; in the north-west, they will be up next month.

I cannot break down into granular detail how many of the complaints were actioned to the point where we have taken the vehicles off the road. Some of the complaints will have led to vehicles being taken off the road, others will be repeat complaints about the same operator and others will carry forward into the next year. The point is that those vehicles that present an immediate risk to road or public safety are dealt with immediately. We will bring in the police to support some of those operations.

Mr K Buchanan: This is my final point. You have given me the three areas: totally unregulated, social unregulated and regulated. From taxi operators that I have spoken to, it seems that you guys go after easy pickings. I am only saying what I have been told: you go after the regulated guys and the unregulated guys get away. What do you say to them?

Mr Spratt: The relationship between DVA enforcement and legitimate traders has never been better. We have been delivering taximeter testing as part of innovative thinking whereby, as part of every taximeter test, we get the opportunity to do a compliance check at the roadside. We use that opportunity to collect information and concerns at the roadside. For example, we know that the work that we did predominantly in Belfast because of the price-gouging over Christmas, resulted in very favourable feedback from the industry, from both public-hire — class B — operators and private-hire operators. We were commended — if you want to call it that — for having changed the attitude of some of the drivers who had been going rogue in the early hours of the morning. All of a sudden, those drivers were coming through in the depot statistics, with depots saying, "We now have so many more drivers — over 30% more — in the early hours of the morning prepared to carry passengers who are properly booked through our system".

However, I will not try to dilute the fact that there is a problem. It is no different to the situation in England, Scotland and Wales. In fact, for a while we were getting a lot of complaints through the nidirect portal from people further afield who were using the Northern Ireland system to report illegal taxis. I assure you that the same dynamic that we have here exists in England, Scotland and Wales and in the South of Ireland.

Mr K Buchanan: Thanks, Stephen.

The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine): On the issue of young people on Facebook, touting or whatever, asking their friends whether they need a lift home, how do you square that circle? How do you stop that?

Mr Spratt: Going back to what I said to Mr Buchanan, it is extremely difficult. There are certain arrangements on car sharing that may legitimise and allow some of that activity. It is when someone goes beyond the bounds of charging for the overall running costs of sharing the journey and decides to start openly touting for business to fill their pockets. It is that type of thing. We do a lot of work at venues, where we watch for cars that are dropping people off. We have had some success in picking up on instances where payments have been made at the end of journeys and that type of thing. It is a problem.

I do not have the breakdown for how many social taxis sit within the confines of the unregulated category to differentiate between those that might be OK versus those that are not. It is down to how the charges are accrued and how the service is delivered. We would not know that unless we had the information to hand. On an abstract complaint basis, you would not have that level of information.

The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine): OK. Thank you.

Mr K Buchanan: This will take a millisecond. If you catch an unregulated taxi and the driver is charged, fined or whatever, do you make their insurance company aware of that?

Mr Spratt: No, we do not have a protocol for reporting that to the insurance company. However, the good news is that we will shortly meet with representatives of the Motor Insurers' Bureau, which manages the motor insurance database. We hope to have links between that database and our Street Hawk app to do insurance checks. That will be part of the overall brokering in that discussion. It is something that we are mindful of. For modified cars, there is exactly the same problem.

Mr K Buchanan: Thank you.

Mr Spratt: You are welcome.

Mr Durkan: Thanks to the team for coming along. I just want to record the sentiment across the industry that the guys who play by the rules, mostly, and pay by the rules seem to get a much harder time than those who do not play by the rules at all. I appreciate the difficulties, and you have explained them.

As regards the increased or increasing number of taxis, does that reflect the improvements that have been made or the amendments to the testing process that you outlined earlier, Chris? How much of it has been driven by cost-of-living issues? If someone's mortgage is going up £200 or £300 a month, they will look for legitimate ways to generate more money for the household.

What has the Department done to get out the positive message that there is a significant number — a bigger number — of taxis out there now than there was a couple of years ago? Given that the dearth of taxis had an impact on the night-time economy in a number of places that I am aware of — in my constituency, people are still traumatised by the wait that they had some night two or three years ago — is the message getting out that the landscape has changed and it is safe to go out again?

Dr Hughes: Just to be clear, the increase was in the number of vehicle licences. There seems to be a bit of a lag in a corresponding increase in the number of taxi drivers. Just to be clear, there was an increase in the number of vehicles being licensed, which is a precursor to, or an indicator of, an increase in the number of taxi drivers.

You touched on a number of issues, one of which was the cost of living and how taxi drivers make a living. I looked back at statistics for employment in the sector more broadly. If you look at the information that is available through the Office for National Statistics (ONS), you see that from the middle of 2014 to now, employment in the transport and warehousing sector increased by 10%, from 29,000 to 32,000. That increase has not been reflected in the number of people who chose to operate as a taxi driver. The number peaked during COVID, perhaps unsurprisingly. Those are people who work for online retailers and large supermarkets that provide delivery services. It peaked at 36,000 and is now down to 32,000, but it is still 10% higher than it was in 2014. The way in which people are remunerated for coming into the industry is through the review of taxi fares. It is specifically pitched to provide a wage that is equivalent to those for other driving jobs. The latest fare rise was to provide an annual salary for a taxi driver of £27,200, so that is what a taxi driver is currently pitched to earn after the latest taxi fare rises. They can get that money because it is equivalent to driving for one of those other people who provide jobs in a similar industry.

Now, if you are driving a taxi, you can have other expenses which you need to generate income to pay for. You have to pay for your fuel. You have to pay your depot fees, which can be up to £8,200. If you are hire-purchasing your car, that is another £4,000 or £5,000 per year. You have to generate the income to do that. You have to pay your own insurance at £2,000. All those costs need to be generated by you before you can then take your £27,200. In those other industries, the offer is that you turn up, do not work unsocial hours and do not deal with vulnerable people. You turn up, have your rota, do your delivery, have regular hours and know what the circumstances are. The industry is competing with that. As I was saying at the start, Chair, the offer is that we operate within the context of the wider economy, and the economy has changed in that regard.

You asked what we do about advertising. We do not do anything to promote the fact that taxis are more available. Our role is to be the regulator. I hope that that is helpful.

Mr Durkan: Yes. The message went out plenty when numbers were dropping, do you know what I mean? It was well publicised. It might not have been the Department that was putting it out, but there is a role there.

As regards disability access taxis, is it the view that DFI does not really have any role or responsibility per se to increase provision, and that therefore it is not taking any action to do so? Previously, it had been contended that Part 5 of the Transport Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 would allow the Department to intervene in the purchase, I suppose, of vehicles, but I know that increased costs apply to the running of them as well as the purchase.

Mrs Cutrona: Yes. We certainly think that, under the Transport Act 2011, as you said, it could be an option to provide funding. However, it would be the first use of those powers under that legislation, so, for us to consider something like that, we would need to have legal advice, budget, policy

development, and ministerial input and approval. Certainly, it is potentially an option, but we would need to go through a lot of steps.

Mr Durkan: I do not know this for a fact, but I presume that, while the number of disability access taxis has been falling, the number of people who are reliant on them has been increasing. I do not have the figures to back that up, but I imagine that to be the case.

There has been chat about class C, but it was more about the Uber and wedding and funeral car end of things. From the off, in 2015, there was a sort of recognition that they do not really belong there. Donald, I think that you used the phrase a couple of times: "We just have to accept it". I will throw it back to you. Do we? What can be done to clear out those anomalies in the absence of, or while we await, a full review of the Act? Is there scope? It might be OK for us to just accept something, but it is difficult for people who work in those industries to accept that we are just accepting it.

Mr Starritt: With regard to wedding cars, Mark?

Mr Durkan: Yes.

Mr Starritt: Wedding cars — again, this was an Assembly decision, going back as far as the Taxis Act (Northern Ireland) 2008. It was decided that wedding cars should be regulated as taxis — a particular type of taxi. They are subject not to the entire taxi regulatory framework but to certain aspects of it. To drive a wedding car, you have to be a taxi driver. You have to go through the driver testing process, and the vehicle also needs to be tested. The Department has engaged fairly extensively with the industry. We are aware that it wishes to be regulated differently, or possibly deregulated. A route that the industry asked us to explore was to issue exemption certificates to exempt them from the requirements of the Act. The Department did not and will not go down that route, because the Taxis Act was introduced by the Assembly, and the clear intention at that stage was to regulate wedding cars as taxis. If we issued an exemption certificate, we would be exempting the vehicle and also the driver, so, effectively, anyone could drive a wedding car. We know that the vast majority of the industry is legitimate and would not be heading in that direction. However, for us to issue exemption certificates and effectively wash away the requirements of the Taxis Act would be inappropriate. Even before the Taxis Act, wedding cars were regulated as public hire vehicles.

Mr Durkan: It is right that there is regulation. Should the Assembly express a view that they should be regulated differently, might that prompt the Department to relook at the issue?

Mr Starritt: It is certainly something that we would need to take back to the Minister.

Mr Durkan: OK. Thank you.

The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine): Just on the back of what Mark said about the accessible taxis, I am sure that all of us know, from our offices, that Education Authority (EA) transport is becoming an issue with regard to taxi provision for children with special educational needs or those who are disabled. The EA is using the taxi route to provide that home-to-school transport. It is even looking at issues like that in the round if we are seeing a decrease in accessible taxi provision but an increase in the need for home-to-school transport. Have there been any discussions cross-departmentally?

Mrs Cutrona: There has not been any discussion departmentally. The Education Authority has responsibility for school transport for children with special needs, and it has not engaged with us on that issue. It is its responsibility.

Mr McReynolds: Thank you, everyone, for coming in. Just touching on John's point earlier about the theory tests, people have come to my constituency office and spoken about the laborious nature of the theory test, and you have touched on that already. To work this out in my head, what is the difference between the theory test for taxi drivers and members of the public? I would be keen to know. Also, you mentioned a stat in your answer earlier that the pass mark for the hazard perception test had been reduced. Surely that is one of the most important parts? It is not knowledge-based. People are looking at a screen and seeing the hazards in front of them. In my mind, it does not make much sense. Can you elaborate on that? To touch loosely on Mark's question about the wedding and funeral lobby, and to reiterate what he said, the exemption status might be helpful. Is that something that could be looked at in the review of the Taxis Act? They have spoken to me recently and said that it is having a real impact on them. Do you have any figures on how many people that could potentially impact?

Dr Hughes: I did not write those questions down, so I will try to work my way through them. I am sure you will kindly remind me.

The way that the taxi test compares to the test for others is that the taxi driver test looks at the specifics around the customer care element. It is broken down into four parts, which I will try to dig out whilst I am talking to you. Information on the requirements for being a taxi driver is available on the nidirect website. The requirements include customer care, eco-driving and optional first aid. Have you found the four parts, Dorcas?

Mr Starritt: There is disability awareness, too.

Dr Hughes: Thank you for digging that out. There is a taxi syllabus. Questions are based on the areas that are set out in the syllabus, which include road safety, the environment, traffic signs and signals, customer care, disabled passengers, health and safety, legal responsibility and documentation. Those aspects are not part of the normal driving test that people do. Those are the specific elements that are above and beyond. OK, that was one.

Mr McReynolds: It is helpful to know that for when I get further correspondence about it.

You mentioned a statistic about the reduction in the score that people need to obtain in the hazard perception test. Having done a theory test a number of years ago, to my mind, the hazard perception test is one of the most important aspects: ensuring that someone who is on the road sees the hazards in front of them, knows how to react and can say, during the test, how they would react. What was the logic behind reducing the score?

Dr Hughes: It was to keep the test to a level 2 qualification. There had been representation from the industry that it was too difficult. I am going to do something that I really try to avoid doing: I will give you an anecdote. For young people, one of the issues with the hazard perception test is that gamers have to slow their reactions. The computer treats their reactions as being far too fast — "You could not possibly have reacted that quickly" — whereas a teenager would say, "I would have been dead in my game if I had reacted that slowly". Taxi drivers tend not to fall into that category [*Laughter*] so the test is still at level 2. It is actually a part of the test that people were passing, so it was just an adjustment. When we looked at the test in the round, it was felt that that was still a reflection. People have to have had a driver's licence for three years and be an experienced driver, which means that they tend to do very well in the hazard perception test. The difficulty that they have is in the other aspects of the testing.

You also asked about the testing regime. People do the testing regime in a morning. If Members are interested, they can do the practice test. I did it recently. There are 15 questions to bang through. It is multiple choice, so it is quite straightforward to engage with. It gives you a scenario with four choices, and you have to pick the right one. At the end, it tells you whether you were right or wrong. You engage with it online, so you just have to click a button. It is all done at a time — the theory test is followed by the hazard perception test. If you pass all that, you are eligible to book a practical driving test. You have to go through those stages. Does that answer your question?

Mr McReynolds: Yes, it does. Thank you very much. Do you have any figures on how many operators of wedding and funeral cars there may be? I have met people recently who said that they were struggling to get access to drivers in what is quite a niche area. Do you have any statistics on that?

Mrs Cutrona: They fall under class C. There are around 1,500 cars, but that includes Uber cars. We do not have figures for the difference between them.

Dr Hughes: You touched on drivers. The issue is that drivers are dealing with people who will be — I think that this is the phrase — not dressed as they would normally be. They are in wedding gowns. They might not be in top hats, but they are not dressed as they would normally be to jump in and out of a taxi. People may have had a buck's fizz for breakfast. Drivers are dealing with people who may not be as able to jump in and out of a taxi as they would normally be. There is a skill element and a safety element to a passenger's alighting or getting in and out of the vehicle. There was an advert in which the driver braked slowly and the champagne in the back did not spill. Drivers carry passengers as a commercial enterprise, so there is a skill set required for people who are dealing with those situations. It is a skilled offer to the public.

Mr Durkan: May I come in with a wee supplementary?

The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine): Cathal has just indicated.

Mr Boylan: My question is on a slightly different subject, so let Mark in first.

Mr Durkan: You were chatting about the drivers, but this is on the vehicles themselves. We spoke earlier about heights of vehicles and class C. That applies in the instance of wedding cars too, where, at the time of legislation, the big high Hummers that you see now were not really on the road. They are more popular now, but they kind of fall outwith the legislation as it was passed. The vehicle styles have changed, so they cannot get registered as wedding cars even if they have been bought from a wedding operator from across the water that had been using it with no difficulty. It then comes here and is effectively redundant.

Dr Hughes: Whether you purchase a vehicle or not is a commercial decision, and the standards that the vehicle has to meet are there. If you purchase a vehicle that you cannot use for the purposes for which you purposed it, you still have that vehicle to do something else with or sell. It is an issue that we are aware of. The standards are there, the standards are what they are and they are there for safety reasons. As these things evolve, the standards are what they are.

Mr Durkan: Is the enforcement soft enough touch in circumstances like that where you can say, "Jeepers, this is not really the operator or owner's fault"?

Dr Hughes: We are a regulator, so the issue is to ensure that the vehicles are safe for people to get into and out of.

Mr Durkan: Is that another thing that we just have to accept, rather than try to change?

Mr Starritt: On occasion, there will be vehicles that will look pristine, but they have, for example —. This is maybe not just what you are talking about, Mark, but say, for example, a London taxi has come across, but does not look anything like a London taxi now. That vehicle can struggle — in our view, rightly — to come into the industry because it has been changed so fundamentally that we cannot give the safety guarantees that we need to give.

Dr Hughes: To build on that, a London taxi is built for a particular chassis and has a braking system. Again, I am straying outside my area of expertise, but it is a braking system that is to be brake the vehicle for the weight that is applied. If you then change the body substantially on that vehicle, you can increase the weight quite dramatically, and therefore —. Also, if it is subject to a collision from the side, for example —.

Mr Durkan: Do not get me wrong. Safety is paramount, but some of these issues seem more a question of style than safety.

Dr Hughes: You need the standards for the safety issues. You would expect us as regulators to say that, and I hope that we would say that. We have standards that are there to protect the safety of the travelling public. There are issues that, as Donald pointed out, are not visible.

Mr Durkan: I agree 100%, and any vehicle can have issues like that —.

Dr Hughes: Honestly, we really do want the vehicles to meet the standards and provide safe transport. That is what we want, just to be really clear on that.

Mr Durkan: We all want that, not least the operators that are running the vehicles, I hope.

The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine): Cathal, did you want to raise another point?

Mr Boylan: Stephen is sitting over the corner and has only been asked a few questions, so I want to give him the last opportunity. Going back to the report and the legal stuff, how is that communicated to you in the Department and how do you get that message out? Say I want to make a complaint about something. How is that communicated?

Mr Spratt: You can log in to the nidirect website, where it explains how to make a complaint about an illegal taxi operator. You can submit that using the email address there. There is also a telephone number that you can phone in confidence. We invite and welcome people to use that and to step outside that fear. Any information that is conveyed to us is done in strict confidence, and it is important that, where we can, we speak to the complainant to fill in the gaps. Sometimes there might be more to what comes in is a rather banal complaint, and that makes it easier for us to investigate. So you can use the email address, and the telephone number is there as well. By way of choice, to follow up with the email and speak to one of our officers is the ideal.

Mr Boylan: Are you resourced to deal with that?

Mr Spratt: We have a team specifically for that, and there is a proper structured model that that operates under. It is not dissimilar to other enforcement agencies.

Mrs Cutrona: There is a complaints process on nidirect, and that takes you through it step by step. In the first instance, you maybe say to the driver that you are contacting the operator. If you do not get any satisfaction there, you then go to DVA. There is another process if you are a disabled person who has a complaint. There are steps, and there is guidance on nidirect about how you go through the process to complain.

Mr Boylan: OK. Thank you.

The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine): I am conscious that you are here over your time, and I appreciate the fact that you have been here for a while. Very quickly, to clarify, can you seize an unregulated car that is operating as a taxi?

Mr Spratt: Yes.

The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine): You can.

Mr Spratt: We can.

The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine): Again, is that in cases when, for example, you see those Facebook posts touting for business?

Mr Spratt: Yes. When it comes to the exercise of those powers, we have to have reasonable grounds to take that action. Anecdotally, simply basing that on a complaint would not stand up to scrutiny. We have a policy against which we will make those assumptions. For example, if it is a mystery shopper and the evidence is obtained, it is relatively straightforward, but, outside that, each case has to be looked at on its own evidential merits. In direct answer to your question, yes, we do have powers to seize an unlicensed taxi.

The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine): I have become aware, from people tagging me on X, which used to be Twitter, that, on Saturday and Friday evenings, people are parking in taxi ranks around Belfast. Where does enforcement come in when the likes of redcoats etc are off duty?

Mr Spratt: From a DVA enforcement perspective, we have no jurisdiction over dealing with illegal parking. If the road is obstructed, there may be circumstances under which police might be able to forcibly have a vehicle removed, as an example. If there is a problem profile associated with the like of that, the ideal is to report that to the parking authority. The only exception to the rule is that, if a vehicle has gone on to the likes of the public hire rank and the driver is behind the wheel, it might be that we would construe that they are applying illegally for hire, and then we would deal with it using our own enforcement authority at that stage. However, as I say, the parking of vehicles is, strictly speaking —.

The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine): It is becoming a safety issue. If taxis are stopping on the road and people are trying to get in and out of cars and the taxi rank is full of parked cars, it is becoming a wee bit of an issue.

Anyway, thank you for your time at the Committee today. We really appreciate all the evidence that you have given. There are a few points to follow up on in relation to the consultation. It would be useful to see if the Department thinks that that would be a good idea to take that forward. It would be useful if

you were able to come back to us as soon as you can to see if you will be responding to it. Members certainly have a bit of homework in relation to practising online our own practical test. We will maybe confer next week and see how we have got on.

Mr Boylan: We are going gaming, Chair.

The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine): Thank you. We really appreciate your evidence today.