

Taxi forum – De - zoning

31 March 2010, Council Offices Gernon Road

Present: G Silverio – Licensing Manager, NHDC
S Cobb – Senior Licensing Officer, NHDC
C Broadhurst – Licensing and Enforcement Office, NHDC
N Huxley – 5 Star Cabs
M Thind – Boxall Taxi Ltd
P Narang – 1st Class Taxi
R Lafferty – Castle Taxis
E Page – Independent
M Day – Tinys Taxis Ltd
A Bhungal – Cabstar
S Khan – Owner/Driver
G and M Porter – Eurocabs
D McDonald – Independent
G Davies – Meltax
B Stewart – Meltax
P Perryman – Butlers
B Perryman – Butlers
C Grant – Butlers

L Hopkins – NHDC, minutes

Introduction:

GS opened the meeting with introductions and reconfirmed that the purpose of the meeting was to discuss the possible de-zoning of the North Herts District.

Overview – SC

As zoning is included in the work plan and the Taxi Policy is due for consultation and renewal, rather than include two options (to keep current zones or to de-zone) in the work plan/policy it was decided to have a forum to get the views of the trade and to consult with the public through NHDC's Citizens Panel. It was explained that historically the public have had very little input into such decisions but as there is the possibility we may go against Best Practise and depart from the guidelines (that zones should go) we need to provide substantial evidence to Cllrs that includes the trade and the public, our customers, feedback.

NH questioned why the views of the general public were being considered as it is unlikely they would understand what zoning is and the implications as it effects the drivers more than the public. **SC** explained that for Cllr Brindley to make an informed decision all views need to be considered as those of the public may be different to those in the trade. It was confirmed that de-zoning is a license to operate over the District rather than specific areas for which a license is held.

SC/GS will also look at the for/against de-zoning once all the consultation has been completed.

A round the table discussion was held for all to give their views:

MD – 100% against de-zoning in Hitchin (consultation document provided showing a total of 34/34 drivers against de-zoning). The reasons given were too many taxis on Hitchin ranks already, an influx of drivers at busy times, difficulties tracing drivers should there be a complaint and the possibility of drivers from Stevenage and Luton taking advantage of the de-zoning.

RL – (consultation documents provided showing 18 drivers against de-zoning, the document did not give the option to vote for de-zoning). RL asked if the geographical test should de-zoning be introduced cover the whole area? This may deter new drivers if they are to be questioned about the whole area. **SC/GS** reconfirmed they do not have an answer to all questions that could be raised at this Forum but will endeavour to address concerns after consultation. **MP** asked if existing drivers would have to retake the tests.

SK – (consultation documents provided showing 47 drivers against de-zoning and none for). All drivers consulted were against de - zoning. The reasons given were too many taxis in Hitchin already, taxis parking outside venues will increase blocking roads and undercutting could cause problems between drivers. Station permits will increase and there is only a limited number of spaces.

DM – (consultation documents provided showing 11 drivers against de-zoning, the document did not give the option to vote for de-zoning). It was felt that policing would be difficult, taxis would be driving around as there is limited space on the ranks. Zoning has cars where they are needed, cars might migrate to other areas in busy times leaving limited availability elsewhere. It is already possible to have a dual badge so would it not be possible to change the rules so taxis can be flagged down in any area? The share of work is there already as a local firm will bring a fare into Hitchin rather than a Hitchin firm doing the initial pick up.

GP – agreed with all the points of view so far and felt de - zoning would create trouble between drivers.

MP – customers should be able to flag a taxi wherever they are as they would not know that a car is not able to pick up outside their zones. Station advertising was raised – Simon Young to make contact.

GD – Pro de – zoning. Royston do not have any ranks and would like to be able to work from a rank. Why can't a pick up take place outside a zone if there aren't taxis available in the area? With the saving NHDC will make, extra policing could be provided. The geographical test could be overcome by all companies taking advantage of technology, it is not impossible to know the shortest routes.

Butlers – (16 drivers for de-zoning, 14 against). De-zoning would not affect station ranks or supermarkets as permits have to be issued and it can still be enforced if required. Tests need re-vamping, Royston have Sat Navs and the driver location is known at all times. Drivers will be called back if they have not collected a fare. Tests could be done by the location of hospitals, cinemas and landmarks rather than specific roads. De-zoning makes it fair for all drivers, zones only work in larger

areas. It seems that there is a huge fear factor of the unknown, that everyone will have their livelihood taken.

Independents have the most to gain from de-zoning. Cost efficiency would be improved and this will have a knock on effect to the Customer. Not may Councils operate zones, better use should be made of Sat Nav and technology to increase efficiencies and therefore cut costs.

EP – (questionnaire sent to drivers, 94% against de-zoning. Returns not handed in). EP felt that de-zoning would put Independents out of business.

NH – de-zoning will cost the public more. Outside cabs could come in, they wont know where they are going and the standard of vehicles are not as high as North Herts.

MT – (consultation document provided showing 17 drivers against de-zoning and none for). MT had listened to all the pros and cons, there needs to be a benefit to the trade as well as the customer.

PN – If a company was based in Knebworth there could be confusion with the 01438 number and trade will be picked up in Stevenage as well as Hitchin as Knebworth is between Hitchin and Stevenage.

CB – CB felt de-zoning would be harder to Police, with zones it is easier to identify cars should there be a complaint.

A general discussion followed. **GD** felt that de-zoning can only benefit Customers as there would be more availability 24/7. Independents may be lost as they can not cover 24 hours a day. **SK** disagreed with this statement as although 1 car may not be available all day it can be shared with other Independents to provide cover. It was asked if it was Meltax's intention to saturate the area with cars. **GD** stated that if it doesn't make money then they wont operate, if it does then why not! **DM** questioned the carbon footprint of the potential dead mileage operating outside of the existing areas. Would drivers be based in the area they were operating from? **GD** assured the forum there would be no dead mileage. The geographical tests were discussed again, **GD** felt that if all North Herts taxi's had better computerised systems then the costs would go down, the question was asked whether **GD** was pro de-zoning to benefit his company or the customer. **PP** felt that if Royston had a rank there would not be so much negativity amongst Royston drivers.

Parking outside venues was discussed, at the moment there is a common courtesy with the drivers that the customer is directed to the front car. This may not exist if cars are coming in from other areas and are competing for fares. **EP** pointed out that drivers should not be parking up outside venues as it causes an obstruction and should be moved on. The overall feeling was that with the current zones there are no problems, de-zoning would create problems.

RL asked for confirmation that a Sat Nav cannot be used when taking a written test – this was confirmed.

In summing up, **GS** stated that all statements need to be substantiated i.e. potential cost savings and a decision will be made on all the evidence provided.

The Taxi Forum will next meet @ 10.00am on 7 April 2010, CR 1 Gernon Road.

