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Licensing Regulation Possible Changes Proposal

Central Government has set out regulation to act as guidance to local authorities. There lies the rub. Local authorities will do their best to interpret the guidance as best as they can and this creates different rules for different councils. No one council interpretation is better than another's and deficiencies in interpretation on this local level have long been resolved.

Issues arise today because of shortcomings of not enforcing existing local regulation in a transparent and rigorous manner. The private hire/hackney carriage trade is not alone in this area and similar problems can be identified in many professions including the health service and police.

There needs to be a will to change the status quo with a view to make things better. Licensing needs to have a dynamic functionality that, hopefully, should be relevant to current needs and demands and facilitate changes in a safe and pragmatic way.

I would like this document to be as informative as possible and not let it degenerate into a list of desired changes to suit taxi trade business models. I have also made some suggestions in the following document 'Working Together' that hopes to illustrate how local councils could work together to increase efficiency and reduce costs. Streamlining regulation between councils would have beneficial effects administratively and make enforcing regulation much simpler.

It should be noted that most of Wokingham's school runs, Social Care runs and journeys requested by various agencies within Wokingham Council are executed by drivers and vehicles licensed in other boroughs using their criteria. This illustrates even further the complicated situation that exists today. I have staff that are required to be safeguard trained in three different boroughs to be universally compliant, not to mention twice in Wokingham Council to be eligible for all types of work there.

I work with four and soon to be five councils in the area of taxi and private hire as an Operator executing patient transport and school and adult social care transport. This is an area I have worked in for 25 years within the biggest private hire/taxi firms in Reading.

As public transport has been reduced and major demographic changes have taken place without local infrastructure in housing, education, healthcare and adult social care being expanded to cope, the taxi and private hire business has been brought in



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to take up the slack in getting more and increasingly longer journeys completed. At the same time the increase in EHCP and SEND statements puts even more pressure on School transport departments.

Safeguarding and Other Compulsory Training

Since Covid lockdowns, systems for safeguarding, first aid and other areas connected to licensing have gone online, and stayed there. These should be brought back to face to face where proper interaction between educator and student produces a far higher quality of information transfer and understanding of the subject.

Research is now taking place between Kieran Hinchliffe of licensing and Rebecca Brooks from Transport planning, with the help of Readibus, to formulate a safeguarding and awareness course that satisfies safety and is fit for the future. I have no doubts that if this is approved by Wokingham it will be adopted by other councils that I work with that are in the same situation but seemingly more uncomfortable with present online options.

Driving Assessments

Driving assessments have been a part of licensing whether it be a school run or taxi/ph driver and rightly so. At present there is one option to book and complete this course with bluelamp. They do not have their own staff but aggregate the course to driving instructors. There is a very long wait time to get an appointment as backlogs due to Covid showing no signs of slowing down. An option to have a second or third organisation to complete this test with would cut wait times and increase flexibility with appointment times There are other options such as Mann Solutions that have their own staff, give timely and convenient appointments to over 16 councils in the south. This company was set up by an ex-police driving instructor, not a tech expert. There should always be more than one option in case one firm ceases trading or reaches capacity and then a long procurement process potentially brings the licensing process to a standstill meantime.

Medicals

Medicals are another area where changes would be helpful to expedite driving licence applications. Until recently all medicals had to be by an applicant's own GP. Apparently now if the GP has no availability or doesn't offer this service other arrangements can be made. If it is acceptable under certain circumstances to use a



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GP that is not yours then why isn't it acceptable in all cases. The charge is anything from £150-280 per medical from one's own GP. This money goes into the practice, not the doctors pocket. Many GP's are stretched to the limit and will see an ill member on their list rather than do a medical examination, some GP practises outright refuse to do them. It should be noted that the licensing process to become a private hire driver/taxi driver is already an expensive outlay for people who are looking at an income of £25000pa after they gain their licence. The overall cost of gaining a new badge is approaching £700 and for most there is the cost of buying and licensing a vehicle on top of that.

This illustrates another major issue in the ongoing supply of drivers whether they be taxi/private hire or school run drivers. Wokingham as opposed to other areas like Reading allow Uber drivers to operate without a local licence or accountability in the Wokingham district. There is much less scrutiny among Uber drivers as Uber is an online app not a taxi company with a local office and their drivers do not conform to or have the expense of getting a local licence. This may be a reason why local councils do not use them. It should be noted that Uber have had to expand into other areas to make a profit while destroying local cab companies with unsustainably low fares. These are the true colours of a disruptor and it takes money from the pocket of a locally licensed drivers and Wokingham Council and subsequently reduces the pool of available drivers.

All of the above points are there to illustrate the difficulties of recruitment to satisfy the needs of Wokingham's local community. This is my main thrust with this submission. I live in Wokingham, it is my local community. I serve the local people of Wokingham in my capacity as an Operator. I am sure that everyone concerned with this subject put the community first and hopefully we can modernise and streamline applications whilst keeping the high standards that already exist,

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