

Taxi drivers ask council for a lift

Edinburgh taxi drivers are having a bit of a hard time, much like many others Edinburgh trying to run a business.

But the difference for cab drivers is that they are very affected by the new measures, and many are self-employed. In the first part of the lockdown they got the SEISS grant from HMRC which is now no longer available. What they are offered instead is a grant from 1 November 2020 – but the catch is they actually have to be trading then, and it will only be 20% of their earnings between November and January.

So the worry for Jacqui Dunn Secretary of Unite the union, Edinburgh Cab Branch, is how can the drivers claim this unless they are trading. But she does have a solution which involves the council.

Jacqui said: “We have asked our Licensing Authority for help and no-one has got back to us at all. Transport Scotland has actually given money to help the buses and trams. We are seen as a public service provider, so why are they not giving us any help? We feel we are lost. We have taxi drivers who are owners with vehicles worth about £60-70,000. The finance on these is possibly more than even their mortgage payment. So if these drivers are not out making money how are they going to pay their finance?

“We have drivers who are handing back their vehicles. How many drivers will we have left at the end of this? This is a

massive concern. If the taxi trade goes then it is a massive concern with thousands of people out of work.”

When I asked what kind of help The City of Edinburgh Council could offer, Jacqui explained that the authority holds a pool of money which could be used to help taxi drivers right now.

She said: “The council have a ring-fenced budget for the money we have given to them for our licensing fees, and badges. The money is meant to be kept intact. They have said that they are going to use £500,000 of that to spend on a new taxi examination centre. This is not needed right now. But £1.1 million is sitting in an account right now, and why can't that money that we have paid be paid back to us just now?”

The cab drivers may well plan a protest now but they are concerned about upsetting the public and are considering their position carefully.

When we asked The City of Edinburgh Council for a comment earlier in the week in response to our story about the cabbies feeling forgotten, the regulatory Convener Cllr Cathy Fullerton said: “There has been regular contact with the trade throughout the pandemic and we recognised the financial pressures on the trade as soon as lockdown began in March. In recognition of this Council took the decision to defer the payment of the taxi and private hire car applications. Further deferment of payment unfortunately isn't possible as we have to balance this with the cost of operating the licensing service and a decision was taken by the Council at its Policy and Sustainability Committee in August to that affect.

“The taxi examination service was also suspended when lockdown began and from 31 March the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency (DVSA) granted a six month exemption from MOT testing. This was conditional on vehicles being kept in a roadworthy

condition with drivers potentially being prosecuted if found to be driving an unsafe vehicle.

“In July we were able to reopen the taxi examination centre and have increased the testing capacity by over a third to make sure that all vehicles that missed their test are offered one so they are able to continue to operate.”

We are asking if Cllr Fullerton perhaps has a further comment on the solution offered by the union. Watch this space.