

Taxi drivers have their say before Monday's council meeting

We have had sight of the written deputation prepared by Unite the union, Edinburgh Cab Branch, for the council's Regulatory Committee on Monday 2 November 2020.

We reproduce it in full below. Deputations used to be delivered in person by those presenting them, but as a result of the pandemic and meetings being held online, this is not currently allowed by the council. The councillors are expected to read all of the written contributions.

Ahead of the meeting the coalition has lodged an amendment which will put a pause on the requirements for drivers to have a taxi less than 10 years old and that the taxi is at least Euro 5 compliant. These requirements will now be delayed until 30 September 2021 if this is agreed by the Regulatory Committee tomorrow.

When we spoke to one of the members of the Regulatory Committee, Cllr Susan Rae, about taxi drivers recently she said: "I am concerned about how they will survive and I am really concerned about the effects on the city. They are our ambassadors for the city, but I fear for the taxi trade. They have a key role in tourism in the city especially if we want fewer cars, we will really need taxis then."

Edinburgh taxi drivers are part of the body of 38,000 taxi and

private hire drivers all over Scotland who are suffering a loss of business directly due to the pandemic and the lockdown response to it. The members of Unite the union, Edinburgh Cab Branch say they are considering joining the protest at Holyrood which their union is planning later in November. A joint meeting was held last week with members joining in from Glasgow, Dundee and Edinburgh to discuss the action.

For now however, the drivers are appealing not only to the council but also to their local MSPs to lobby the government for financial help. Many drivers are not entitled to a part of the £40 million pot offered by The Scottish Government as they either don't have business premises, or they do not have a business bank account, which are some of the criteria. They are however clear in their message – the taxi trade needs help.

One of the drivers we spoke to Jacqui Dunn, who is Secretary of the Edinburgh Cab Branch, said that after her expenses she earned £51 last weekend for shifts from Thursday evening until Sunday evening. The council here has imposed a further financial burden on the drivers by insisting on the low emission vehicles that drivers have now invested in. But with a taxi which meets these requirements costing anything up to £70,000, these costs are not inconsiderable.

We spoke to Scott Blair who is Chair of Edinburgh Cab Branch Unite the Union, at 3 o'clock in the afternoon. He had been out since 8am and he showed us his meter displaying income of £42.35 for that day – and £2 of that was a fee paid to Edinburgh Airport for a drop off. Tourists are thin on the ground, so customers just now are elderly shoppers who for whatever reason don't want to take public transport. Taxis are sitting at hospitals to help visitors to get back and forward, or indeed patients who are being discharged. The previous day he had spent over three hours at Waverley waiting for a hire.

The drivers have sent the written deputation to the council to

demand that they defer payment of licence fees for now – as they did earlier in the year. The council said that doing so cost them £740,000 in lost income, but this is not totally lost. Recovery of the deferred payments which were only on pause for a few months has begun. Drivers are also calling on the council to use the ring fenced fund which amounts to £1.1 million to help taxi drivers out with short term grants or loans.

We asked the council leader Adam McVey about help for the taxi trade, but it appears there is not much on the table other than the deferral of fees which has now ended.

Listen here:

The council under their ageing emissions policy insisted that the taxis used in Edinburgh were at least up to Euro VI standard and so a lot of drivers have renewed cabs in the last year or so. This has meant higher overheads for many, with an electric cab costing up to £70,000 to buy. There are only three to choose from – a Mercedes, a Ford and an electric taxi. In Glasgow these steps have been put back by a year, but it is too late here. The drivers support the cleaner vehicles anyway, but the cost is crippling them right now. There are 1,316 taxis in Edinburgh, all of which are liable to pay a fee of £365 per annum to the council for the MOT and compliance check which is usually a 3% uplift each year.

Scott Blair said: “The worry we have is that if we all just hand our cabs back to the finance companies then who will step in to run the taxi trade in the city? Most of use are individuals so will this mean that larger companies and organisations take over the trade?

“We continue to try to have dialogue with the council but we really need them to listen now. I read your previous article

with a comment from the Licensing Convener, saying that 'further deferment of payment unfortunately isn't possible' and I found that quite offensive.

"When lockdown first started in March we got a letter from the council saying the test centre would be closing. I raised with them whether they would defer licence payments and initially they said no. We were told to continue making payment of the test fees, and I found it shocking that the council were not giving us any kind of help. Then the council made a U-turn at one of the Policy and Sustainability committee meetings. They have never come forward with any help really. They deferred the payments while the test centre was closed – but we still had to pay those fees in the middle of June even though the test centre was closed until mid July.

"They said there would be losses to the licensing department in the region of £469,000 by deferring payment for three months. We found it quite difficult to understand how they would lose money when the payments were still being made – they had only been deferred.

"They have not spoken to us about anything. There is no dialogue about this. Every penny that is paid in from either cab tests or badge renewals must be ring-fenced for something related to taxis. This means painting taxi ranks or whatever, but the pot of money must be used for the taxi trade, and the council is not allowed to make a profit from it. The council holds a pot of £1.1 million as one of their officers explained to the council. In the Civic Government Act they are prevented from making a profit although they can cover costs here. They say they are holding this money to build a new test centre at Murrayburn.

"We are all individually owned. Who would apply to the council for these plates? It is really not a viable business for an individual to start up a business right now."

The deputation from Edinburgh Cab Branch Unite the union reads as follows:

We would like to highlight how disappointed we are regarding the lack of communication we have had from our licensing committee and officers over the last few months, we have had not one reply, this is highly unprofessional and unacceptable. as our members have serious concerns that need answered and as our licensing authority this shows apathy in your licensed taxi trade.

Shortfall

We understand there would be a period in between March to June 2020 where licensing wasn't receiving licensing fees due to the TEC being closed, but the fees were only deferred not stopped and now the TEC has reopened all fees are being paid.

We believe there will be a shortfall in fees and this be coming from the amount of drivers not renewing their taxi badges due to the considerable drop in work and we ask you for a breakdown of these losses.

With your Age and Emissions policy that is forcing drivers to buy extortionate priced vehicles and with finance companies being cautious in lending in these times especially to taxi operators, this could affect our numbers.

Taxi operators are fully aware that their original test date will stand, so can committee explain what will work will be carried out at the TEC between March and June 2021?

TEC

In the reserve sits £1.1 million, that has been cited on several occasions that it would be used for a new TEC, we are happy to see that you are reassessing this antiquated way of

working.

We at Edinburgh Cab Branch want a new modern, simpler, cheaper method of testing that is align with the 21st Century, as clearly having £1.1 million sitting in reserve proves that Edinburgh licensing is overcharging for the service it provides.

An Mot at a DVSA certified garage and then a compliance station with a comprehensive and detailed compliance list should be adequate to carry out the testing of taxis.

Edinburgh Cab Branch feel to increase first time passes, a compliance checklist be made available to all garages and taxi operators, as at present no compliance checklist is available and each examiner works to their own standard, so a pass or fail can be determined by that examiners mood, there is a lack of confidence in how the TEC has and is operating on that basis.

Training

It is going to take the trade years to recover from this pandemic and we are going to see our numbers reduced dramatically, we ask that all existing drivers who have already carried out Council modules be exempt from the city and guilds training for 3 years to relieve the financial pressure on us.

As there has been no communication from licensing regarding an email we sent on 23/10/2020 regarding the rise in Airport fees, we would like it noted to committee that we explained to you on the 09/03/2020 at a Regulatory meeting regarding the taxi tariff that this would happen and why the trade wanted the wording on the tariff sheet to reflect that all charges incurred be recoverable, which is embarrassing for all taxi drivers to be asking our passengers to pay these extortionate and over inflated fees, but this was rejected and here we are again, out of pocket. When will this vicious circle end and

you listen to us? Frankly it's disappointing and tiring.

We would like committee to explain to us what the several temporary mitigating measures that they introduced to support us are? As we had to ask you to defer payments and only after pressure in the press, did this happen!

Thank you for reading our deputation today and we hope you get the feeling of despondency we are experiencing at this present time, our members mental well being is of a great concern for us, the worry due to lack of work, no financial assistance and mounting debts, is weighing heavily on all minds, we are the forgotten industry.

The council's Regulatory Committee meets on Monday 2 November 2020 at 9.30am and you can watch the proceedings live on the council webcast [here](#).



Taxi Queue. Photo: Martin P. McAdam www.martinmcadam.com