

Councillors block private hire access to bus lanes in trial scheme

Private hire drivers in Edinburgh have been left furious after being blocked from using bus lanes due to have their hours temporarily extended.

Transport officials recommended including access for private hire cars (PHCs) in a trial of '7-7-7' bus lanes, in which some will be operational from 7am to 7pm, seven days a week for 18 months from early 2025.

Councillors, while approving the pilot project, said they were not convinced allowing pre-booked cars, which make up the vast majority of the city's taxis, would be a good idea.

Transport convener Scott Arthur said the more vehicles that are added "the harder it is for the bus lane to do its job".

And he raised concerns over bus lanes acting as "curry lanes" as a result of drivers who both transport passengers and deliver food taking advantage of them.

Trade representatives argued they should be on an equal footing with black cabs, which are allowed in bus lanes during peak hours, and stressed the only way to determine the impact of giving PHCs access on congestion and bus times was to include them in the trial.

Stuart Livingstone from the Scottish Private Hire

Association's Edinburgh branch said: "By trialing private hire access we would be able to put facts against the claims being made by those on both sides of the argument."

Capital Cars boss Kevin Woodburn said private hire "performs a public transport function on a daily basis".

Mr Woodburn was so enraged at the situation he told councillors he was "trying extremely hard to keep calm" during the transport committee meeting on Thursday, August 15.

"Everything is based on opinion," he said. "It seems to have been missed that this trial is to gather that data."

GMB's Colin Dodds argued it would be unfair on people with disabilities to exclude PHCs.

"Private hire do take people who use wheelchairs, not permanently naturally, but people who want to put the wheelchair or any form of electric wheelchair into the back of the car and assist them into the back seat of the car. That happens daily," he said.

"We are part of the jigsaw to reduce congestion."

He added: "I really have to refrain from what I am going to say because I am so frustrated."

Greens councillor Kayleigh O'Neill, who uses a wheelchair, said she felt he was "using" those with mobility issues to support his argument, adding "I really don't care for that.

"Over 90 per cent of black cabs are accessible, every Lothian Bus has a ramp and at least one space but less than 10 per cent of PHCs are deemed as accessible and some still deny disabled passengers. I tried a few weeks ago and had six separate Ubers cancel on me."

Uber's UK head of cities Matthew Freckelton said allowing PHCs in bus lanes would "create a more efficient transport network"

as well as reduce congestion, leading to shorter journey times and lower fares.

The council's director of operational services Gareth Barwell said part of the reason officers backed inclusion of PHCs in the trial was so gather data on the impact.

"If the worst happened, we can amend a [traffic order] within a matter of weeks," he said.

Cllr Arthur, who was chairing his last transport committee after being elected as Edinburgh South West's new Labour MP, said: "When drivers speak to me . . . the issue they raise isn't access to bus lanes, often it's just the sheer number of private hire cars in the city and they see that as a challenge to their income rather than access to bus lanes.

"If there's a choice between having neither private hire cars nor black cabs or adding private hire cars to the mix, perhaps we should go for neither rather than adding more vehicles to the bus lane.

"Because the more vehicles you add, the harder it is for the bus lane to do its job."

The Labour administration alongside the SNP, Lib Dems and Greens, all rejected the recommendation, while the Conservatives questioned if the 7-7-7 trial was necessary.

Lib Dem group leader Kevin Lang said he "didn't really feel there was a set of arguments made".

He said: "I was not persuaded of the merits of allowing private hire vehicles into bus lanes."

Councillor Marie-Clair Munro, Conservatives, said: "The bus lanes currently work across the city and the public understand it.

"We think basically if you've got the public understanding how

a system works why are we changing it? The trial does not monitor – this is what concerns us – the data or the specific proposals that delay buses across our city.”

Most bus lanes across the city currently allow all vehicles outwith peak times of 7.30am to 9.30am and 4pm to 6.30pm, and don't operate on weekends.

Under the trial, those between the Gillespie Crossroads in Juniper Green and Musselburgh – a route which mirrors Lothian Buses' 44 service – will be active from 7am to 7pm, Monday to Sunday.

It's anticipated an 18-month pilot will commence in the first quarter of next year and cost the council £80,000 over the next two financial years.

A report to councillors said increasing bus priority measures on the roads would improve the reliability of public transport for the city's population, which is growing six times faster than the national average.

Once implemented the it will be “extensively monitored,” and the start and end times of operation will be “examined to evaluate whether they remain optimal”.

By Donald Turvill Local Democracy Reporter