

TAXI FARE REVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE

Name (Optional):

Northern Ireland Tourism Association (NITA)

1. Are you: (tick all that apply)

- A taxi operator
- A taxi driver
- A member of the public
- Other

2. Customers only - do you use taxis (please tick all that apply):

- Socially, e.g. going out at evenings or weekends, visiting friends
- For work, e.g. to get to and from your workplace
- For essential journeys, e.g. food shopping, going to the doctor or hospital
- Other (please specify) -

Tourists use taxis at all times to get to different attractions/experiences/tours

3. Inflation and the costs to taxi drivers and operators have been going up. At the same time, many taxi customers find it harder to pay for taxis. We have been told that the maximum fare at evening and weekends is too low. This means there are not enough drivers working at these times. Taking these into account, should we (please tick one) :

- Not increase taxi fares at this time
- Increase fares only at evenings and weekends
- Increase all fares, but increase by more for evenings and weekends than the rest of the week
- Increase fares the same throughout the week

4. Fuel costs have risen during 2022. They are predicted to peak this year, then fall back in 2023. There is a cost to changing each taximeter every time the fare is changed, so we don't want to do it more than we need to. However, we also want to ensure drivers get a fair income, and customers pay a fair price. Do you think we should (please tick one):

- Use the predicted peak cost of fuel (this is about £2 per litre)
- Use a mid-range predicted price (this is about £1.75)
- Use the long term predicted (this is about £1.69)
- Use the cost from the review at March 2022 (£1.48)
- Other – please comment

We appreciate that there is a cost to changing a taximeter, however there does need to be some flexibility within the system to be able to change prices between price reviews where there are exceptional circumstances or where the price of fuel has significantly increased/decreased. Although as we have seen, prices at the pumps reflect increases much quicker than decreases. What also needs to be considered are the other costs associated with running a taxi such as insurance and maintenance which are much higher than for normal car users.

5. Drivers and Operators only.

We have been told that the figures we were using for depot rent were too low (consultation in September 2021). This means we need to consider a large increase in this part of the taxi fare calculation, of 20% or more. To make sure we are using the right figures now can you please tell us what the weekly depot rent is that you pay/charge (please tick one):

- < £99
- £100 - £119
- £120 - £140
- £140+
- Not Applicable

6. A taxi fare review is generally completed every two years or so. Prices are changing a lot, but there is a cost to changing each taximeter every time the fare is changed. Do you think we should (please tick one):

- Keep doing a review every 2 years, so the next review is in 2024
- Do another review next year if fuel costs drop

7. If there is an increase in the taxi fare will you (please tick one):

- Use taxis more
- Use taxis the same amount
- Use taxis less
- Stop using taxis at all

8. Any further comments.

NITA was established in 2018 and led by industry, it is a single representative body acting as a Voice for Tourism in Northern Ireland. NITA's role is to represent members from across the tourism economy and ensure the voice of industry is listened to.

NITA welcomes the opportunity to respond to the consultation on Taxi Fare Increase and we are submitting our views after consultation with our members across all sectors of the tourism economy including those from the taxi sector. It is critical that visitors to our region are able to get around at times that suit them.

The Covid 19 pandemic exacerbated the decline in driver numbers and caused many taxi drivers to leave the industry - drivers have not returned in sufficient numbers after finding other employment during lockdown or have taken early retirement. The requirement to equip vehicles with calibrated meters, signage and other equipment costing approximately £1,000 per vehicle may have forced some drivers to either leave the industry or drive Class C taxis. In 2013 there were 15,300 licensed drivers in Northern Ireland, in 2018-19 10,268 drivers, in 2021 8,700 drivers but recent figures provided showed only 6,318 drivers currently on operator licenses and not all of these will be current active drivers. On average the industry has been losing approximately 1,000 drivers per year with an additional 3,000 licensed drivers not actually working.

Taxis are an important part of the transport network in Northern Ireland and visitors to our country use and rely on them on a regular basis. Buses and trains in Northern Ireland do not run effectively at night time and taxis are the only viable travel option - but at peak times demand outstrips supply so extra drivers are needed particularly at these times. There are just not enough drivers working peak times and evenings and weekends and the reward for working anti-social hours is not sufficient to incentivize drivers to do so.

This has resulted in not enough drivers to do the different types of taxiing jobs during non peak times also – tourists are particularly impacted here. Tourists can be vulnerable especially when travelling alone or if they do not have English as their first language and they need to be guaranteed a safe and reliable environment when travelling late at night. Currently the shortage of drivers plus increased fares are leading to a decrease in confidence from taxi users.

The lack of availability and 'surge pricing' is a disincentive for tourists whether these issues are real or perceived. Tourists arriving at airports and cruise terminals waiting a long time for a taxi gives them a poor impression of our city. Social media already has examples of users outside NI complaining about availability, costs and 'cash only' drivers. Staycations for local tourists are no longer favourable when there is a breakdown in the transport system in the evenings or at peak times. Potential visitors to Northern Ireland will end up choosing alternative destinations. The tourism industry has an ambition to double in size and one of the barriers to this will be our reputation on how easy it is to travel around the region.

Tourists drive business into hospitality businesses, such as restaurants and pubs and we have already seen the impact of a lack of taxi drivers where customers are leaving early to ensure they can get a taxi back to their accommodation or deciding not to visit bars and restaurants as they cannot get a taxi. This can lead to an increase in illegal taxiing with uninsured and unvetted drivers and an increase in anti-social behaviour if streets cannot be cleared at closing time. This is not the image or the memory that we want our visitors to leave with. Hospitality staff feel unsafe working unsociable hours as they worry that they might have to walk home if they cannot get a taxi. We are also seeing restaurants reduce opening days/hours and the lack of taxi drivers is exacerbating the problem.

The goal of our NITA members is to tackle the shortage of taxi drivers in

Northern Ireland by making taxi driving a more attractive career, by simplifying the current process to become a regulated taxi driver (by removing the new theory testing and temporarily rolling back to pre 2014 where drivers required a license with experience, a medical and enhanced vetting), by regulating Class C drivers (by closing the loopholes to prevent excessive fares, improve customer safety and deliver a standard legislative 'playing field' for all taxi services) and by providing a financial incentive to drivers through financial support and maximizing their profits (by sensibly increasing fares and by improving the outdated fare structure).

NITA would like to highlight that it is important that these solutions put forward by the taxi industry are addressed and implemented as soon as possible. We would also like to question whether there has been an increase in drivers since the financial support was offered in the Taxi Action Plan in September 2021 (including covering fees for new drivers who successfully obtain their taxi driver and vehicle license from April '21 to March '22) as there have been no statistics released in relation to this?

Our members feel that there is no guarantee that a proposal to increase all taxi fares will increase the number of drivers (the previous increase in November 2021 did not appear to encourage drivers to work longer hours or peak anti-social periods) and an increase in all fares may have the reverse affect and damage the taxi industry by discouraging customers, including tourists, from using taxis. An increase in fares would help combat increasing costs for existing drivers, an increase of 12.6% to £1.90 or an increase of 16% to £1.96 as proposed in the consultation is a significant increase and as we have stated in our response, there should be a weighting in the increase for prices weekends and peak times because it will encourage more drivers to work at this time as they will be getting premium fares during the busiest hours when demand is high.

NITA understands from the information presented in the consultation that there have been increases in taxi fares in other regions in the UK but it is difficult to make an effective comparison as the regions mentioned are working at different rates and use different rating systems and price bands. We would suggest undertaking a more detailed comparison when the next taxi price review takes place in 2024 as the economic climate should have settled by then.

We very much welcome the banding system that is proposed and we feel that this is the most important part of the consultation proposal as it addresses the fare structure system that our members have highlighted. Currently many of the drivers that are working prefer to work Monday to Friday daytime hours to fit in with family life and this obviously causes shortages at evenings and weekends. Different rates are already expected by tourists who have comparable systems in their own countries. However, it is important that this rating system is transparent and displayed in taxis to avoid any confusion for customers.

We look forward to hearing the outcome of this consultation and we welcome any opportunity to be part of that. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you require any further information or would like to meet to discuss the above.

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The Department has engaged with a small number of stakeholders as part of the pre-consultation process to take their view on the potential of a Taxi fare increase.

High-level Section 75 (S75) and Rural Needs screening exercises have been completed for the potential taxi fare increase. However equality screening is a live process that will be considered alongside the Public Consultation process as it evolves and as such the Department would welcome input from all S75 identities and in particular from the following:

- Age;
- Persons with dependents;
- Persons with a disability; and
- Comments from representatives of rural communities would also be welcomed.

Further S75 screening (and, if deemed appropriate) EQIAs will be carried out when policies/practice are being updated in response to the 2022 Taxi fare review.

While it is considered that the potential increase in taxi fares will have some negative impact on section 75 categories and on rural needs, it is believed that a lack of or reduced taxi service would have a more detrimental effect on NI society and on economic life. The policy and practice contributing to the implementation of the fare review will be screened where appropriate to ensure that this is the case.

9. Are there any equality impacts that you feel need to be considered? If so please provide details.

We would like to highlight the importance of transparency in any proposed increase in taxi fares – to ensure that tourists to the country are aware of the rating bands and understand that it is a fair pricing system for everyone and that every customer in the taxi is charged the same way depending on the time period in which they are travelling.

10. Are there any rural needs impacts that you feel need to be considered? If so please provide details.

We would like to note that it is important to have the same level of service

throughout Northern Ireland – rural and city wide. From the tourism perspective we have many visitors who stay in rural areas and use it as a base for travelling further afield to visit attractions and for sightseeing and they need to have the same access to taxis wherever they visit.

Email these document to: **TaxiFareReview@infrastructure-ni.gov.uk**