

09 March 2011



east kilbride
taxis

5 Main Street, The Village,
East Kilbride G74 4JH

TEL: 01355 229171
TEL: 01355 238555
EMAIL: ektaxis@btconnect.com
WEB: www.ektaxis.co.uk

FAO Teresa Stone

Licensing & Registration Office
FREEPOST RRBJ-GXHX-JJEC
102 Cadzow Street
Hamilton
ML3 6HH

Dear Teresa

Safety for Taxi Drivers - Introduction of Zero Tolerance Policy for Taxi Drivers

We refer to the above and to a recent conversation with Frank Carroll, Licensing Standards Officer for East Kilbride, on this matter. Our secretary, Raymond Smith, suggested that due to the increasing number of verbal and sometimes physical attacks on drivers, it may be an idea for our Licensing Authority to introduce such a policy and advertise it to members of the public perhaps via window stickers.

We have looked at information from a report carried out by the Department for Transport which lists the types of abuse and the situations during which those incidents are most likely to occur. Many of them are familiar to our situation and we have used them as examples.

On 25th March 2010 I wrote to you on behalf of our Members regarding the possibility of the introduction of CCTV systems within our taxis. So far our Association has not received any positive response, but fully understand that Council funds are at a minimum. The above option offers an alternative approach to the idea of warning those members of the public, who think they can intimidate drivers with verbal or even physical abuse, that it won't be tolerated. The option should also be vastly more cost effective.

We would like to comment on the different types of incidents and make some suggestions that would help reduce the risk of such behaviour towards our drivers.

• **Problem Situations**

Types of incidents

The drivers experience incidents that range from low-level verbal abuse, robbery, threats of violence and actual violence. It is the perception of drivers and their associations that the frequency of incidents is increasing and so is the severity of violence or aggression from the perpetrators. Problems could be caused by anyone, although given the high demand for taxis within the town centre late at night, many of those causing the problems are likely to be younger, rather than older people. Increasing numbers of women are said to cause problems for the driver.

Violent offences

Some drivers may be subjected to assaults and robbery. The emotional and physical impact of some incidents is so severe that the victim has stopped working as a taxi driver. The frequency of such incidents is thankfully much less than those of verbal abuse or threats. Most drivers if they have not experienced such an incident personally, will know of someone who has been attacked whilst working. Drivers are more at risk of attack or robbery in isolated locations. Some attacks on drivers are premeditated where perpetrators set out to rob the drivers and use violence to achieve their objective.



Fare Dodging

If drivers take action to prevent passengers from running off without paying it can make them vulnerable to abuse, robbery or violence.

Fares and tariffs

Disputes about fares are often the trigger for arguments and can quickly escalate into more general (and racist) abuse, leading sometimes to violence against the driver and/or criminal damage to the vehicle. There appears to be a lack of awareness among the public regarding fare structures, changes in tariff and the boundaries beyond which the driver does not have to run on a meter.

Verbal abuse

Drivers often experience verbal abuse from customers ranging from casual or dismissive rudeness to severe abuse that can be threatening. Rudeness can be triggered by customer disagreement with the fare or their irritation at any difficulties or delays experienced in obtaining a cab. However it can often just be due to the fact the passenger has had a bad day, or even just for the sake of it.

Racist abuse

Asian and other minority ethnic drivers appear to be subject to higher levels of abuse and much of this is racist in content. Very few of these incidents are reported to the police.

• **Comments**

When and where drivers are most at risk

Night-time is the period when most of the problems occur, many associated with the late night economy. There is a consensus that problems can happen anywhere, but are most likely within major towns and cities. However, it is not in the busy city or town centre that problems are most likely to occur but on route to the destination or at the end of a journey, when a driver is very much on his or her own. There are some neighbourhoods that are felt to be less safe for drivers, but the problems are thankfully said to be caused by only a small minority and usually at specific localities within those areas.

The causes of incidents

Drivers always work alone, they often work late into the night when the risks are usually higher and are known to carry cash. Plying for hire on the street may make a taxi driver more vulnerable because there is no information readily available to the driver about the person or persons that he or she is picking up.

Alcohol misuse

The problems faced by drivers are closely associated with alcohol misuse. The pressure is on the police and others to clear the town centre as quickly as possible at the end of the night, and this can mean drivers picking up customers that are very drunk and whom they would rather refuse to carry. Dealing with situations where customers have taken illegal drugs is far more difficult for drivers, although the use of illegal drugs is said to be increasing as a contributing factor to criminal and anti social incidents.

Lack of respect

A strong belief held by many drivers, controllers and others representing the trade is that the root cause of many of the problems is a lack of respect from some members of the public towards taxi drivers.

Language skills

Drivers without a good command of English are thought to be especially vulnerable to abuse and attack because of the potential for misunderstanding triggering confrontation. Asian and other minority ethnic drivers themselves identified the absence of an ability to communicate easily to customers as a factor that can put drivers at greater risk. Another feature that is said by drivers and associations to raise the risk of confrontation, especially racist abuse, is for Asian or other minority ethnic drivers to wear traditional dress. This was said to draw attention to the differences between the driver and the customer.

• Solutions

Reporting incidents to the police

Many incidents go unreported to the police and, as a consequence, the police are often not aware of the type or scale of the problems that drivers face. It is usually only the most serious incidents requiring or involving police assistance and hospital attendance that are reported. Key reasons given in the research for incidents not being reported are the loss of potential income while reporting; the fact that the police are unlikely to take it seriously, and absence of witnesses. Familiarity with the customers and their families may also deter reporting because of fear of loss of future trade or retaliation. However we encourage all our drivers to report any such incidents to the police and let them deal with it.

Police response

There is strong criticism from drivers and their associations about the level of police response and a widely held perception that the police did not take the problems faced by taxi drivers seriously. The introduction of CCTV around the town centre and village areas in East Kilbride, combined with the limited manpower available to Strathclyde Police, has created a delay which can sometimes lead to further verbal or physical confrontation with a troublesome member of the public.

The response from the police in respect of fare dodging is said to vary widely between forces. This can undermine the trust between drivers and the police. There are also misunderstandings on the part of drivers about the role of the police in respect of such incidents, with some forces treating it as a civil case and others going out of their way to try and help the driver recover the fare.

In-car CCTV camera surveillance

A pilot project in Sheffield has found the installation of in-cab CCTV led to a significant reduction in incidents of abuse, threats and violence. However, progress for the wider take-up by the trade has been slow. Some associations and drivers feel that in-cab notices about the presence of CCTV cameras could be as effective as the equipment itself. Without resolution of the driver concerns about the police response, cameras are not felt by some to be effective, although their use in collecting evidence is acknowledged.

The cost of installing and maintaining the cameras is the main barrier identified by many, but not all, drivers. However, there appears to be a widely varying understanding of the costs involved and little awareness that installation can have a beneficial effect on insurance premiums.

Communication systems

Good radio communication between the taxi driver and their base can be a means of speedily requesting advice and assistance. Good communication between drivers can also help relay information about potential troublemakers in a locality. There is usually a facility for the driver to activate a silent in-cab button to alert the base of an emergency.

Experience and responsive attitudes

Driver attitude and their interaction with customers can play a key role in defusing potentially abusive or violent situations, even when the passengers are drunk or appear to be aggressive. The ability to assess the potential for confrontation is seen as a valuable skill, often learnt from many years in the trade.

Rank marshals

Many areas have taxi marshals to control ranks, especially late into the night. Whilst acknowledging their role for customer safety and reducing the potential for confrontation and violence between those waiting, many drivers also identified that rank marshals have a positive influence on their own safety. Here in East Kilbride our drivers have a very positive attitude towards the Marshals.

Raising public awareness

There are examples of initiatives in other environments that seek to raise awareness among the public of their anti social or dangerous activities and have introduced 'zero tolerance' campaigns to tackle violence against staff. One way of raising public awareness that is supported by drivers is to have a police poster displayed in taxis as well as the local press stating that anti social or racist behaviour will not be tolerated and there will be a police response if it is reported.

Understanding the trade

Police officers working at operational level should be provided with information that raises their awareness of the distinction between taxi and private hire regulations, in particular those relating to the right to ply for hire. This has recently been highlighted in recent issues we have raised with Strathclyde Police and South Lanarkshire Council.

Guidance for staying safe

Guidance should be prepared for taxi and private hire vehicle drivers, with the aim of helping them to take appropriate precautions to prevent violence, and advising them of what they should do in the event of a threat or violent incident.

Fare Dodging

Whilst the guidance may refer to fare dodging, it should focus on incidents and threats of violence. Steps should be taken to ensure that all police forces fully understand the criminal law in relation to non-payment of fares and are consistent when dealing with such incidents. Fare dodging, where there is intention to avoid payment of a fare, is always a criminal offence under the Theft Act. It is only a civil matter if the passenger is unhappy with the quality of the service and wishes to dispute that the full fare is payable.

We hope that you will understand our concerns regarding the safety of our taxi drivers and look forward to receiving your feedback on the above.

Yours sincerely,



Peter Blackwood
Office Manager.

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Graphtics

15 September 2011

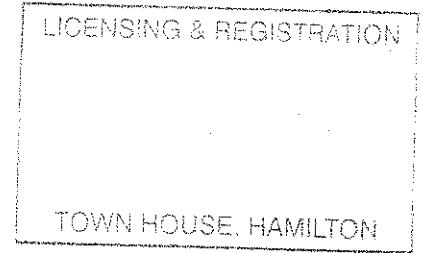


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Dear Teresa

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Please find enclosed a sample sticker that we propose for our taxis. We hope that this will meet with your approval and look forward to hearing from you in the near future.

Yours sincerely,

Peter Blackwood
Office Manager.

