



SOROPTIMIST INTERNATIONAL OF TUNBRIDGE WELLS & DISTRICT



WOMEN'S VIEW OF TAXIS IN TUNBRIDGE WELLS

About Soroptimist International of Tunbridge Wells and District:

Our Club was established in 1946. It is part of a worldwide organisation working for human rights and the advancement of women, and for international friendship and understanding. SI is the world's largest women's service organisation and has General Consultative Status at the United Nations.

We seek to use women's perspectives and skills to good effect in the community, and carry out fact-finding, practical projects and fundraising to that end, locally, nationally and internationally.

This report on taxis and hire cars is one of a series addressing issues raised by local women and girls.

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WOMEN'S VIEW OF TAXIS IN TUNBRIDGE WELLS

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Terms used in this report

Council	Tunbridge Wells Borough Council except where otherwise stated.
Private hire vehicles	<p>Anyone inviting or accepting a car booking for a private hire journey must hold an operator's licence issued by the Council and employ drivers licensed by them. The Council sets conditions for standards of drivers and vehicles and the vehicles with their meters have to pass 6 monthly stringent tests.</p> <p>All private hire vehicles must be pre-booked. Customers mostly find them through directories or word of mouth.</p>
Licensed taxis	In Council terminology “hackney carriages”. These may in addition to taking bookings ply directly for hire in the street or at a taxi rank. The number of licensed taxis is regulated by the Council which also sets the tariff of maximum fares. The Council has no powers to regulate the numbers or fares of other private hire vehicles.
Licensed drivers	Drivers of both taxis and private hire cars in order to get the necessary licence, have to comply with Council conditions including being over 23, undertaking a special driving test, having criminal record and medical health checks, and in the case of new applicants attending a seminar in the Town Hall.
Cabs	Term sometimes used in this report as shorthand for both licensed taxis and private hire cars.

Executive Summary

Women's view of taxis in Tunbridge Wells

Taxis and hire cars are a godsend to many people for getting around Tunbridge Wells, with its hills and poor bus services. A survey of women's views in March 2006 has shown that over four fifths of them want a taxi rank at Five Ways to replace the former private hire depot there. A small comparable sample of men's views gives a similar picture. Virtually nobody was aware of any other taxi rank in Tunbridge Wells other than at the station.

Other issues raised by many women were safety at night, prices, standards of drivers behaviour and of vehicles, and the unreliability and delays of many private hire cars. There need to be clearer criteria and a code of conduct for licensing of both taxis and private hire cars. Taxis and hire cars should be entitled to use bus lanes and the central "gate road" of the town. This would reduce delays, benefit the environment and help keep down fares. Better provision should also be made for picking up and setting down vehicle passengers generally, and safer travel in the evenings. All these matters should be looked at as part of a revised public transport plan for the town, giving proper weight to taxis and hire cars. The introduction of free bus travel for all elderly people introduces a major new factor.

The Council should meanwhile urgently review what provision is to be made for access by taxis and hire cars in current development proposals for the Royal Victoria Place, to avoid repeating past planning mistakes.

A joint task force with Kent County Council should be set up to secure prompt establishment of a taxi rank of 6–10 places at Five Ways. It should also tackle administrative barriers to a more coordinated approach on highways matters, traffic management and transport provision generally. The present opaque situation hampers the town's efforts to achieve its strategic goals and improve the quality of life for all.

The report suggests that all these matters should be addressed in the newly announced Borough Council review of unmet demand for taxis, and by Kent County Council.

The main recommendations in the report are:

- 1. Clarification, based on assessment of supply and demand, of the intended roles of the locations at present marked out for taxis.**
- 2. High visibility appropriate signage at the site of designated taxi ranks and in the Royal Victoria Place, and better information on maps and the Council website.**
- 3. Creation of a clearly marked licensed taxi rank of, say, 6–10 places behind the Millenium Clock at Five Ways.**

4. Planning conditions for user-friendly taxi and hire car access in any redevelopment at the RVP.
5. Establishment of safe waiting places for taxis at night.
6. Published criteria for taxi cab and operators licences and associated standards required.
7. Clear information about taxi and hire regulation for the public.
8. Preparation of a code of good practice for taxis and hire cars.
9. Requirement for all taxis and hire cars to display prominently an address where complaints can be reported.
10. “Plated” licensed taxis and private hire cars with discs should be entitled to use bus lanes and the town centre “gate”.
11. Provision of well signed pick-up and set-down points.
12. Preparation of a public transport strategy statement that includes taxis and hire cars.
13. Establishment of a task force with Kent County Council to remove existing administrative barriers to highway, traffic management and public transport measures to benefit Tunbridge Wells and to monitor progress.
14. Integration of the public transport strategy statement into an updated and more comprehensive long term transport strategy for the town and its hinterland including Wealden District.
15. Establishment of a taxi forum.
16. Inclusion of all the points made in this report in the forthcoming review of licensed taxis and hire cars.
17. Early consideration by KCC of the findings of this report in relation to its highways, traffic and transport responsibilities and accountability to the people of Tunbridge Wells.

Chapter 1: Carrying out the survey

Why the survey was carried out

1.1 Taxis and hire cars are a godsend to many people who would otherwise be cut off from day to day activities that others take for granted. We decided to collect shoppers' views about availability of taxis at the main shopping centre of Tunbridge Wells. Earlier surveys had shown that women in Tunbridge Wells put better public transport high up their wish list. Some had to cope with heavy shopping or young children, some were elderly and without access to a car, and some would simply have preferred to leave the car at home. Others were worried about the safety of their children out and about in the evenings. With increasing numbers of the very elderly and those living on their own, and the construction of many new apartments, the demand for taxis and hire cars seemed likely to grow.

1.2 Tunbridge Wells is an elongated and hilly town. Bus services are poor to many parts and virtually nonexistent in the evenings. The railway station lies down a steep hill some way from the shopping cluster of Royal Victoria Place, Calverley Road and Camden Road. Various shops and cafes straggle down the long valley to the Pantiles. The hospital, a few shops and cafes and large areas of housing without bus services sit on the ridge above the main shopping centre. When we started to collect responses to our questionnaire it not surprisingly became clear that the hills to be negotiated were a significant factor in where people were prepared to walk. Typical remarks made to us were "*That hill-phew!*" "*those awful hills*", "*You have to struggle up that hill*", "*You get here, then it's a hard hill to climb to the hospital when you're elderly*", "*You need a taxi particularly if you have to go up the hill*", "*It's OK for able-bodied, but it's a long walk for the disabled or elderly*", "*I've got not one but two hills to cope with*", "*I somehow never go down to the bottom of the town these days. The climb back is too much for me.*"

1.3 Given this situation and the problems of those unable or unwilling to walk, it seemed astonishing that there was no obvious taxi rank in the town centre, and no setting down or waiting places there for those wishing to use hire cars or a lift from friends.

What we did

1.4 With a view to finding out the reason for this, we carried out a street survey, asking four simple questions.

- Where do you think the nearest licensed taxi stand is to here?
- Would you like one in the town centre? If so what do you think about Five Ways and how often would you use it?
- Where else would you like one?
- What other comments do you have about Tunbridge Wells taxis?

We carried out 60 street interviews at Five Ways on Wednesday, 8th March 2006, International Women's Day, by way of celebrating our 60 years as a women's organisation

active in Tunbridge Wells. Their ages ranged from under 20 to 92 years old and were fairly evenly spread over the age bands 20 upwards, with a slight bias towards the older age groups, since these were the people out and about.

1.5 We supplemented this with 40 questionnaires among residents in two blocks of flats, a group of clerical workers at Kent and Sussex Hospital, and residents in some streets in the upper end of the town. We also put the same questions to 10 men, again randomly chosen, by way of a comparative sample. Men's views differed little from those of the women we interviewed. We have therefore tabulated the findings in relation to women only, but draw attention in the text to a couple of points made only by men.

1.6 To set the survey in context, we visited all the town taxi ranks named on the Council website, and discussed with taxi drivers the use made of these. Background information about the borough taxi licensing process was helpfully supplied by the Council.

1.7 The findings and recommendations of this report about unmet demand for a rank at or near Five Ways also identify other related taxi and hire car matters where change is needed.

Chapter 2: Do we need a new taxi rank serving the shopping centre?

2.1 This was the central issue the survey was designed to address. A resounding “yes” came from 85% of those interviewed. This chapter describes what people said and our recommendations flowing from that.

Question 1: Where is the nearest licensed taxi stand?

2.2 We wanted to establish first how many people knew about the sites that existed close to the shopping precinct. It had been difficult to dig details of these out from the Council website (indeed it baffled the Borough website officer we consulted). We found the list obscurely tucked away under “disabled access”. It was not shown on town maps or in tourist information.

2.3 The correct answer would have been marked bays at any one of four places:

- i. Newton Road;
- ii. Calverley Road;
- iii. Civic Way in front of the Library;
- iv. Mount Pleasant in front of Hawkshead.



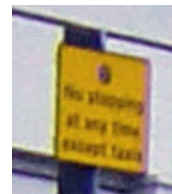
There are also two bays on Camden Road available only between 9pm and 6am.



We were told of a further two recently established bays in Lime Hill Road which were not listed on the website, but then had some difficulty tracking them on the ground, as they were obscured by a parked lorry.

2.4 When we inspected the listed sites, we found a sorry state of affairs:

- the selection of sites appeared completely random;
- none was easily spotted since the only indications were the word “Taxi” painted on the roadway, and differing small prohibition sign facing the roadway, with the addition in minuscule writing “except taxis”;



- none was being used by a taxi.

At the same time, at the station down the hill the ranks were overflowing with cabs sitting idle.



2.5 We subsequently asked ten different licensed cab taxi drivers how often they used these places. All said they would not ply for hire there though one said he sometimes used Newton Road to set down passengers, and that at night one or two taxis sometimes waited outside Hawkshead. Typical answers were:

“A waste of time. Completely obscure places where nobody would think of looking. I don’t get a wage from anyone else. You could never make a living there”;

“I tried waiting on the one outside Hawkshead once for 3 hours and didn’t get a single customer. Never again”;

“You’ll never get us working from odd places like that. You need about 10 places to wait and people coming”.

2.6 We had been told a few weeks earlier, after we asked a Councillor why there was no rank in the shopping area, that she was advised this was not needed as there were spaces designated in that area already. In the light of what we saw and learned from the survey, this seems a misapprehension. We had also been told by a taxi operator that in the past there had been disagreement about whether these taxi spaces were “taxi ranks”, where the cab driver must at all time be in his vehicle and available for hiring, or “taxi stands”, where a driver might leave his cab temporarily for a comfort stop. Failing resolution of this, the signs had been removed by the Council.

2.7 If so, this was scarcely a satisfactory solution from the public’s viewpoint. It seemed to us that it is incumbent on the Council to decide, after assessing both supply and demand, what purpose the designated taxi spaces are intended to serve, and whether the options also include setting down and picking up by both taxis and hire cars. In doing so, the Council needs to recognise that to be successful a rank has to be a viable size which attracts both taxi-drivers and customers. The Council’s forthcoming review of its ceiling on licensed taxi numbers *vis a vis* unmet demand – something that the Government has required all licensing authorities to undertake – could usefully help clarify the way forward.

2.8 Once the purpose of the sites has been defined, clear signs then need to be erected to inform all concerned.

What the survey revealed

2.9 Given the absence of visible signage and that no vehicles regularly wait at the designated sites, it was scarcely surprising that 96% of the women interviewed did not know they existed. Only 1 woman, and 1 man mentioned the nearest marked site at Newton Road and 3 women and 2 men mentioned the Library.

2.10 Three quarters of those surveyed thought the railway station was the only taxi rank in Tunbridge Wells, 15 per cent didn’t know where there was one, and 6 per cent thought it was beside Tesco, where private hire cars booked by phone pull up on the double yellow lines of the traffic circuit to pick up shoppers. Four women at the Kent and Sussex Hospital named High Brooms station, where a private hire firm is based (another source of confusion we return to below). The few who had spotted the road markings by the Library hastened to add that there were no cabs there, though one or two had occasionally been sighted in the past. Two women attributed this to the absence of signs and any information on maps.

We recommend

- clarification by the Council, based on assessment of supply and demand, of the intended roles of the locations at present marked out for taxis;
- high visibility appropriate signage at designated taxi ranks and in the Royal Victoria Centre, plus information on maps and the Council website.

Question 2: Would you like a nearer one, in particular at Five Ways?

2.11 Given the distance to the railway station rank, not surprisingly the answer was that 85% were in favour of this.

2.12 Most of these thought the loop of road behind the Millennium Clock would be a good place. Typical remarks were:

"Where that clock thing is. That makes the most sense";

"With all the shops it ought to be here";

"Perfect. Then I could actually walk there and not have to phone";

"You need it if you've come in by bus and want to go up to the hospital – whichever way you go you've got that awful hill";

"You could easily see if a taxi was waiting".

2.13 Nearly a fifth of these immediately followed with a regretful reference to the loss of the Starline depot formerly in Lime Hill Road.

"That's where Starline used to be";

"There always used to be one at Five Ways";

"It's such a shame they stopped Starline. The buses don't run – after 6pm you've had it";

"It would be spot on to have it there. It always used to be there. There was light and somewhere warm to wait. You weren't just standing in the dark";

"I used to walk to town and get a taxi back from Starline's old office. I appreciated that facility";

"We need Starline back in the centre. It always used to be there".

2.14 So far as we are aware the public were never asked whether they wanted a replacement taxi facility when luxury flats and a restaurant were built on the Starline site and the loop road created behind the millennium clock replacement. Had this happened, the strength of popular demand might possibly have been taken into account by the planners and traffic engineers, and the area designed rather differently.

2.15 Reasons offered by some why a new facility would be useful (besides coping with the hills) were attending appointments, heavy shopping, children, bad weather, having to wait a long time for a bus, feeling tired or poorly. Six people observed how welcome it would be to have a taxi to get to the Kent and Sussex Hospital since it is not served by buses. Three others mentioned the difficulty of getting home when they were dropped in the middle of

the town in the evening after a coach excursion. It seems to us this problem may grow with the availability of free travel for elderly people on scheduled buses.

2.16 Some of these reasons emerged in answers to our question about likely frequency of use of a rank at Five Ways. Replies ranged through “daily”, “several times a week”, “regularly” to “maybe every six months” or “if it rained and I was tired”, “at night when we have had wine or drinks”, “whenever I needed it for convenience and safety”. One man commented “you would do more opportunity-buying of food and heavy things when you were in the town rather than bringing the car in or going elsewhere”. This chimed with comments by several other people that they would like the option not to have to bring their car in and thought that if many other people felt the same that would benefit traffic conditions in the town.

2.17 We thought the most telling evidence bearing on demand was what used to happen when Starline had their depot there. A steady flow of people would cross its forecourt to the office, particularly when laden with shopping, and it was rare to wait alone in the office. There is no reason to suppose that the demand has changed, or would not speedily revive. Indeed some people said as much. They observed that they were happy to use a lift or a bus into the town or to walk there if it was downhill, but their return was usually much more loosely planned and timed depending on weather, amount of shopping, how they are feeling, expected delays before a bus came or simply impulse on seeing an available taxi waiting before their eyes. Prima facie, with a clearly visible stand and vehicles on it, good use is likely to be made of it during shopping hours or by people attending appointments or visiting elsewhere in the town. There is undoubtedly a strong unmet demand.

2.18 Reasons volunteered by some of those who did not wish for a Five Ways rank were that they always used their car (though 3 qualified that by saying that at some date in the future they would no longer be able to drive), they preferred to walk, they always used a bus, they would call a cab or family member on their mobile if they needed a lift.

2.19 We observed a line of vehicles parked along the double yellow lines in the road loop by the clock, including vans, blue badge holders, and private cars and hire cars apparently waiting to pick someone up by arrangement. This is a regular occurrence. The shortage of pick-up and set-down points in the centre of the town is a related traffic planning issue we return to below.



The taxi drivers' views

2.20 When asked for views, licensed taxi drivers said:

"We have been pressing for a proper stand at Five Ways for years. Among other things it would spread us around a bit in a helpful way. The Council just don't want to know";

"When we've dropped someone off at that end of the town it would be useful to look for customers there rather than coming all the way back to the station";

"When we have pressed the council people on this they have been totally negative, saying the county council have put double yellow lines on the road and the borough cant change that".

2.21 If this is where taxi drivers – who after all are directly involved in studying opportunities for hirings in order to make a living – believe there should be a rank, it seems to us that they should be carefully listened to. It would be beneficial for drivers, users and the environment if the number of "empty miles" running back to the station rank were reduced. Moreover hirings there by shoppers would usefully supplement taxi drivers' income during the "down times" when custom is slack at their present main source of business, the railway station. That in turn might relieve pressure for fare rises – Tunbridge Wells currently has the 9th highest fares in the country.

Taxis at night

2.22 Although this was a daytime survey, 11% of people mentioned the need for a taxi stand near Five Ways at night, and two saw value in having cabs with car radios on the spot to report any disturbance promptly.

"Tunbridge Wells is so different at night";

"If you've been on a coach trip you're stranded";

"You're stuck at night";

"It's frightening at night";

"There's no safety at night at this end of the town. You should be able to share taxis like young people often do when they call them with a mobile phone";

"It's quite scary waiting at the bus stop at night when people have had a few drinks. When Starline was there you could at least sit there in safety, especially females on their own";

"Late at night it's not nice waiting in the street on my own for my cab to come";

"I think there's sometimes a taxi round in Camden Road at night but I wouldn't wait there by myself";

"The availability at the station is good but it's not nice having to walk down there at night".

2.23 The Council have been taking welcome initiatives to tackle town centre anti-social behaviour and create a greater sense of security among those using it at night. We hope they will now specifically consider the views women expressed in this survey about a safe waiting place for taxis and hire cars at night. To secure this requires an integrated

approach covering alcohol and entertainment licensing, taxi licensing, traffic management, the police and “safe public transport”.

The overall picture

2.24 Altogether, the survey indicated a powerful case for a new licensed rank at the heart of the shopping centre to meet the strong unmet demand there. It needs to be clearly visible with at least 6-10 places and to be properly signed. It would increase the public’s safety at night, reduce “empty cab miles” and help keep down taxi prices. It might also help town centre trade and encourage more people to leave their own cars at home. It would be a valuable addition to the public transport networks in the town and boon to many, particularly the elderly, women shoppers without access to cars and those ill-served by bus services.

2.25 If, as represented to us, the main obstacle to all this has been the refusal of traffic engineers in County Hall to review the circuit in this part of the town and remove double yellow lines, that is an unacceptable reason for doing nothing.

2.26 Using the Five Ways loop road could replace the present opportunistic parking without any apparent safety or traffic detriment. Its downside is that now the exit from Lime Hill Road is blocked off, the traffic system would require cabs to make a large detour before reaching the east side of the town. This part of the traffic circuit might need to be examined with fresh eyes. This anyway needs to be done in respect of Tesco’s pickup point (looked at in paragraph 3.16 below). One option would be to create a “cabs only” exit along the side of Dixons and indeed have some parked there. An alternative might be to consider a total make-over of the parking allotment in Newton Road to make a full-scale properly-signed cab rank, since this has the merit of fitting easily into the present traffic circuits.

We recommend:

- creation of a clearly marked licensed taxi rank of sufficient size to be viable, say 6–10 places, behind the Millennium Clock at Five Ways;
- consideration of an exit from this rank onto Mount Pleasant;
- a survey to assess demand for safe places to wait for taxis at night and recommend appropriate measures.

Question 3: Can you name anywhere else in Tunbridge Wells where you would like a stand?

2.27 The following places were mentioned by the percentage of respondents shown:

Ely Court/Camden Road	11
Pantiles	7
Assembly Hall	3
St John's area (no specific place)	3
Sainsburys	3
Tesco	2

Places mentioned by just one or two people that do in fact have taxi places marked (but not used) were the Library, Calverley Road and outside Hawkshead. Also mentioned were Upper Grosvenor Road, Broadwater Down, Monson Road, Mount Ephraim and the cinema site.

2.28 The most frequently mentioned (11%) place was near Ely Court. It was variously described as “*Ely Court*”, “*near Jaegers*”, “*the Camden Road area*”, “*somewhere you can wheel your trolley through Ely Court and then leave*” by which they meant the point where Ely Court joins Camden Road. This seemed to us directly relevant to a planning matter currently before the Council – namely developers’ proposals to build over this part of the RVP. We have not heard of any requirement mooted for a taxi rank or pick-up and set-down points under cover as part of this redevelopment. This is probably because there is no taxi and hire car strategy in Tunbridge Wells to which developers and the highway and traffic authority can refer – a serious omission to which we return below in Chapter 4.

We recommend

- **a planning requirement for user-friendly taxi and hire car access to any new development or redesign of Royal Victoria Place, the Camden Centre area and Ely Court.**

2.29 With an eye to the importance of the Pantiles as a tourist venue, and efforts to increase facilities and trade there, we took a look at the designated taxi place on the Lower Walk. On Sunday a private car was parked there all day. The following Thursday the space was empty all morning. A shop owner whose premises overlooked it said he had never seen a cab there. The space clearly needs to be reviewed in the same way as is recommended for the spaces at the top of the town in paragraph 2.7 above.

2.30 More generally there appears to be a need for some sort of review of public transport provision (including bus, taxi and hire car) between the Pantiles and the shopping centre in relation to economic activity, tourism and other policies in the town. It is a challenge for any stranger, or indeed many local inhabitants, if advised to take a bus from the Common as a direct form of transport to Five Ways, to identify which number it is (“where is Rusthall or High Brooms?” they might say) and where it stops. One low cost option would be to agree with an operator of the most relevant existing service a distinctive

livery and large sign along the side emblazoned “The Tunbridge Wells Shuttle – every ten minutes ” or the like. A shelter and a safer road crossing might need to be provided opposite the Swan. With free travel, many elderly people might make use of it and increase footfall in the Pantiles.

2.31 This might go part way to meeting the point made by one woman interviewed namely

“Where I come from they run little shuttles all day and evening around the place and everybody uses them. I don’t know why they don’t have them here.”

An initiative on these lines would form part of an interim inexpensive but more effective strategy for encouraging movement between the different parts of the town.

Chapter 3: What else people said about taxis and hire cars

Question 4: What other comments do you have about Tunbridge Wells taxis?

3.1 This final question attracted many observations, mostly about

- prices and quality;
- differences between taxis and hire cars;
- unreliability of private hire cars; and
- need for pickup and setdown places.

Each of these is looked at below.

Prices and quality

3.2 Taxi prices were mentioned by 13% of people. Several referred to the “white cabs” or “station cabs” costing more. There were mixed views about this:

“I am happy with what they charge. They have to earn a living”;

“I don’t understand why taxis cost more here than in London”;

“They cost more, but you have the certainty”;

“The station cabs always cost more, but they are handy even if you have to race the louts to get one when you come off the train at night”.

There was word of mouth sharing of information about which hire car firm offered the cheapest deal, but many people seemed to choose not on price but on overall satisfactoriness. As one said

“You get what you pay for”.

3.3 There were some critical remarks about certain hire car vehicles:

“Some of them are so scruffy”;

“The don’t feel clean inside”;

and in the case of one firm

“Some of the drivers smell of sweat”.

3.4 Other people said they were well satisfied with the standard of the private hire firm they used. One at least was seen as highly efficient (three different people praised its ability to pinpoint addresses using post codes) but others less so. As regards helpfulness of drivers the picture was again mixed. On station cabs, one person commented

“Most are OK, but you don’t dare criticise the ones who do silly things like using their mobile phones while driving, and playing the radio very loud. They are the sort who would turn on you”.

Another (a man) mentioned the lack of leg room in the back of some vehicles.

3.5 Some people commented on the helpfulness of private cab drivers. Others said they had switched firms when they found drivers surly or unhelpful. Assistance with getting in

and out of cars and carrying shopping across the pavement was specially appreciated by elderly people:

“It would be nice if they helped seniors with their shopping into the cab and when they get to their destination”.

Some thought their regular private hire company was more willing to offer this than a licensed cab picked at random off the rank.

3.6 Freephones to private hire firms were regarded as a great benefit, though there were comments that a freephone linked to one particular company meant no choice of price or standard. Several people mentioned the spread of freephones linked to one firm. We noted that Tesco's offer the choice of a “tied” freephone and an ordinary call phone, and also the services of a member of staff at the door to help those wheeling large trolleys.

Taxi and hire car regulation

3.7 From the comments offered, it was plain that the differences between taxi (ie hackney carriage) and hire car regulation, its relevance to their condition and prices, the system of consultation on town and rural tariffs, and how tariffs were calculated were a closed book to virtually all. By way of a quick test, we asked a random half a dozen of those we were interviewing about the differences between a licensed taxi and a private hire car and the Council's role in this. None came within a remote distance of describing this correctly.

3.8 We were unable to find if any public document existed setting out the Council's criteria for licensing taxis and hire cars, including conditions and standards that had to be met. We were told by cab drivers that apart from requirements about the age of the vehicle and to have a 6 monthly inspection for safety and cleanliness, they had never been given any written document about criteria used by the Council, though they were given instructions from time to time on the grounds it was “Council policy”. If it is indeed simply a matter of discretion for Council officers how licences are awarded, and performance monitored, with no published written criteria available to the drivers whose livelihood is at stake, this seems to us to risk an accusation of maladministration.

3.9 It would in any event be valuable for more people to understand the regulatory system and the criteria set by the Council for the issue of licences, the different elements of tariffs that are negotiated and how rises are approved – for instance last year's rise of 8% and the shift to an earlier time for the night tariff. We were told that last year was the only time in living memory when an objection had been received from a member of the public.

3.10 The arid technical way that information is presented is a barrier to ordinary people when so-called public consultation takes place. We observed that some other local authorities offer user-friendly information to local people about these matters on their websites and on public display eg notices about tariffs at taxi stands, and fares shown for typical journeys at different times. This is an area of communications that needs more attention in Tunbridge Wells. A better informed public would understand where they might make their views known to the Licensing Committee and where there were issues they might rightly take up with individual operators.

We recommend

- **publication of a statement of criteria for taxi cab and operators licences and associated standards required;**
- **clear information about taxi and hire regulation for the public.**

3.11 As regards expected vehicle standards of cleanliness, behaviour and the courtesy and helpfulness of drivers, the Council do not distinguish between licensed cabs and private hire ones. We believe the public is entitled to expect the same standards of hygiene, behaviour and courtesy from both.

3.12 We think there would be benefit in Tunbridge Wells taking a leaf out of the book of some other local authorities and drawing up in consultation with the trade a code of good practice for all licensed and hire car drivers. It could cover safety and helping disabled people as well as other issues like noisy radios, smoking, cleanliness and offering help with entering and alighting. This might be posted up on the website, cab stands etc, and beside any Freephones offered by individual cab companies. Addresses should be clearly displayed in all cabs advising where dissatisfied passengers can lodge any complaints on standards with either the operator or the Council. Some leaflets in the glove pocket are not enough

We recommend

- **preparation of a code of good practice applying to both taxis and hire cars;**
- **a requirement for all taxis and hire cars to display prominently within the interior an address where complaints can be reported.**

Reliability

3.13 We suspect that in the case of hire cars, the most frequent complaint would be about the waiting interval between ordering a car and getting one, and failures to arrive at the time booked. This was mentioned by 16% of people as the main downside of using a hire car. Typical comments were:

“You have to wait anything up to 15-20 minutes there in the rain with your stuff”;

“At school time you can never risk calling a cab. Even when you have prebooked, it wont arrive for ages”;

“You cant just ring and get one. You always have to prebook. I hate standing there for ages in the street waiting particularly when the drunken louts are around”;

“There’s a phone for calling one, but it’s never under half an hour before it comes”;

“The cab didn’t come at the promised time to get us to the Assembly Hall and after it was getting so late I rang for a third time in agitation asking what had happened and he swore at me saying ‘Do you want a fucking taxi or not’. When I wrote to the owner complaining I never got a reply. I think he just tore it up.”;

“It came so late despite promises to be on time that we missed the train to London and our connection and reserved seats at Paddington”.

3.14 Traffic conditions and road works were mentioned as one factor, though it was felt drivers ought to know these well and make allowances for them. Some practical suggestions were offered:

“Why can’t they use the bus lanes?”

“I’m not sure if they can go through that gated bit in the middle of the town”.

One taxi driver with whom we spoke referred to uncertainty over this and the risk of getting points on his licence, while another said *“I’m not worried personally, because the police let us go through”*. Another referred to the irritation of passengers from the station to Upper Grosvenor Road about the roundabout route and extra cost incurred.

3.15 Why indeed can’t they use the bus lanes? Taxis and hire cars are an essential part of the public transport system serving the town. They should be entitled as of right to use all the bus lanes and the “restricted” centre of the town. Traffic signs should make this crystal clear and there should be no need for the police to exercise discretion. This would reduce journey times and cut down running costs and fares charged. It would benefit users, drivers, traffic conditions generally and the environment. In order to prevent abuse, private hire cars wishing to use bus lanes might have to display an appropriate high visibility disc. To add to safeguards for pedestrians and deter misuse, the central “gated” part of the town might be cobbled or paved distinctively throughout. Three people also said there should be enforcement checks, and possibly stronger warnings of sanctions posted for illegal usage of this route by other vehicles.

We recommend

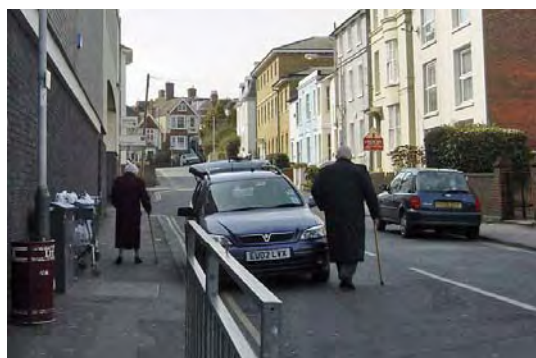
- **“plated” licensed taxis and private hire cars with discs should be allowed to use all bus lanes and the restricted route through the town centre gate.**

Pick-up and set-down places

3.16 Like other parts of any public transport system, taxis and hire cars need safe, clearly marked pick-up and set-down points as close as possible to the places where people want to be. This seems to have been totally ignored by the designers of the traffic system of the town. One major pickup point, where vehicles regularly have to ignore the double yellow lines is in Hanover Road beside Tescos. This pickup point – linked with a freephone inside



the store, provides a vital service, as was plain from the people we interviewed. But there is no question that it causes major congestion in the road and some people mentioned risky situations as trolleys are unloaded into vehicles, and elderly people climb in on the offside.



Moreover those who have ordered a cab often have to wait there, unsheltered, for a considerable time in the open. All those we interviewed there mentioned long waits. “*You can wait up to an hour*” one said.

3.17 We could see the problems over creating a bay or better pickup point along this stretch of residential road, yellow-lined as part of the town’s serpentine traffic management scheme, but believe the circuit should be examined afresh by traffic engineers to find a solution that keeps the vital Tesco’s pickup point either here or close by (for instance the bay in front of The Litten Tree). The desired performance should be spelled out by the Council, and the County traffic engineers required to find solutions.

3.18 For example, as an alternative to Hanover Road, we looked at the stretch of private road that runs behind the Post Office between Upper Grosvenor Road and Goods Station Road. This has long been recognised as an unsightly “grotspot”. It is not used for its designed purpose, ie deliveries to the back of the shops, but as a permanent parking lot by a miscellany of cars completely blocking the roadway, the walls daubed with graffiti and the pavement strewn with rubbish. It seemed to us that if this road were adopted by the highway authority, and designated as an approved drop off and pick up point, it would serve a useful public purpose for the centre of the town, and fit naturally into the traffic circuit. Alternative reserved parking places for the vehicles now using the private road might be offered on favourable terms for a limited period in the Meadow Road Car Park.

3.19 A regular dropping off point in Newton Road as part of the re-examination of how this road might be more constructively used might be another option for consideration.

3.20 We also looked briefly at the pavement outside the Goods Station Road entrance to RVP where there is frequent dropping off by private cars and hire cars, causing traffic blockage. Some adjustment of the kerb to provide a shallow bay might be possible – it is regrettable that at the time the RVP was designed, no thought seems to have been given to this sort of access.

3.21 Other obvious dropping off places we noted for private hire cars and taxis were the former bays at each end of the pedestrian precinct. We were told that representations from taxi drivers about retaining these were refused on the grounds that they were not in the

plans for the traffic management system and therefore could not be kept. Allowing for possible exaggerations, it does seem to us that traffic engineers in designing this whole central area had given little thought – or perhaps had no brief given to them – about the importance of adequate pick-up and set-down points. “*We are powerless*” said one Councillor. “*We keep on making representations but nobody pays any attention.*” This scarcely seems an advertisement for an effective council charged with planning and fostering the economic health and quality of life of the town.

3.22 The time is overdue for this to be put right. Traffic management and transport provision should be the tools not the masters of policies for the town centre. It is nonsensical to treat existing yellow lines and kerb configurations as if they were sacrosanct and entirely someone else’s responsibility. Indeed we find it hard to believe that the County Council would ever claim otherwise. We suspect the real problem is the absence of an explicit and well argued public transport and access strategy for the town. We look at this in the next chapter.

We recommend

- **provision of well signed pick-up and set-down points.**

Chapter 4: Overview of our findings

4.1 The actions proposed in the two preceding chapters should go some way to achieving a more coherent and user-friendly approach to taxi and hire car provision. They would also benefit those who have to rely on lifts from friends or family if they are to get out at all.

4.2 However, what this review has repeatedly revealed is a wider policy issue, namely that the present town transport strategy totally ignores the key public transport role of taxis and hire cars. At the operational level the council seems to be discharging its statutory licensing and tariff setting responsibilities in a policy vacuum. There are plenty of examples of good practice available about how this ought to have been addressed. A quick skim of the web immediately picks up an admirable and lucid set of policies at Bath (a copy is annexed to this report), and a detailed set of guidelines at Sevenoaks. The gaping hole in the Borough's transport plan in relation to taxis and hire cars was pointed out by us in a formal submission at the time the public were invited to comment on the draft. Our suggestions were totally ignored. Indeed the only reference in that Council-approved document to taxis is the intention to abolish the service that serves the town well – the station cab rank on Mount Pleasant.

4.3 Yet the Council website claims:

“The Tunbridge Wells Borough Transport Strategy has been produced to provide a clear way forward for future development and provision of transport services and facilities. The aim of the Transport Strategy is to meet the needs of the entire community including those who travel for business, those who are involved with the movement of goods or those with mobility problems.”

It is indeed worrying if this flawed document is being used as a building block for the various key statements now being drawn up for the new planning system and other policies.

4.4 With the welcome more focussed approach being followed in the Borough Council following the highly critical Audit Commission report, weaknesses on the transport front might hopefully now have begun to be tackled more proficiently. However, there is not unnaturally turmoil while Town Hall posts are shed and re-calibrated. Meanwhile the opaque split of transport and planning responsibilities between borough and the county creates great public frustration and paralysis of action. It is impossible to find out who is answerable for what, how to secure a positive response, and where overall leadership now rests for pulling transport policies together properly for Tunbridge Wells town. This leaves the borough in a weak position both at county level and locally. It is a recipe for drift that could be positively harmful to other policies in the longer term.

We recommend

- **preparation of a public transport strategy statement that embraces buses, trains, taxis, and hire cars serving the town centre, and access points for those coming as car passengers in shared vehicles;**

- **establishment of a task force with Kent County Council to remove existing administrative barriers to its achievement, provide clear leadership and to monitor progress;**
- **integration of the public transport strategy statement into an updated and more comprehensive transport strategy for the town as a whole and its hinterland including the northern part of Wealden District.**

4.5 We have already suggested some ways in which communication with the public could be improved, through signage, maps, notices etc. We welcome the recent establishment of the Town Forum as a focus for open discussion of strategic issues specific to Tunbridge Wells “unparished” town. It seems to us that some of the issues raised by this survey might usefully be debated there, since residents of the town have a large stake in their successful resolution.

4.6 But we also see merit in a wider consultative forum meeting from time to time specifically to get to grip with taxi and hire car matters. We note that Bath has established just such a forum involving users, taxi and hire car operator, highways and licensing staff, disabled groups and other interested parties such as businesses and shops, all of whom have stake in a thriving and effective network. This seems to be working well. The first two topics for a similar gathering in Tunbridge Wells might be the contents of the strategy document and code of practice recommended above. It might also review what information the public would find most helpful on taxi and hire car matters and how it might be made available on the council website and posted up in other public places.

We recommend

- **establishment of a taxi forum.**

4.7 We welcome the Council’s intention to set in hand a review of unmet demand for local taxis and hire cars. We believe this needs to consider all the matters that have emerged from this grass roots survey, and in particular the evidence of strong unmet demand for a full-scale rank in the Five Ways area with its implications for other matters. These include policies for pick up and set down points for private hire cars, access to bus lanes and the town centre by taxis and hire cars as key parts of public transport provision, development and publication of criteria for related licensing and parking policies, a code of conduct for taxi and hire car drivers and the more effective involvement of the public in debate and decision-taking on taxi and hire car matters generally.

We recommend

- **inclusion of all the points and recommendations raised in this report in the forthcoming review of licensed taxis in the town; and Council discussion thereafter;**
- **early consideration by Kent County Council of all these matters in relation to the proper discharge of its highways, traffic and transport responsibilities to the people of Tunbridge Wells.**

Bath and North East Somerset Council

Taxi Policy - April 2005

Policy Background

The government white paper "A New Deal for Transport: Better for Everyone" covers "Better Taxis" (outside London) in the following way:

"Taxis are an important part of an integrated public transport system and, together with private hire vehicles (PHVs), fill the gap when most buses and trains have stopped for the night. Local authorities will need to consider these vehicles in their local transport plans including, for example, the priority they are to be given when road space is reallocated and whether there are sufficient taxi ranks in the right places, operating at the right times of day.

It is important that local authorities use their taxi and licensing powers to ensure that taxis and PHVs in their district are safe, comfortable, properly insured and available where and when required. Outside London, taxis and PHVs are regulated by local authorities to check that vehicles are safe and that drivers do not have relevant criminal convictions."

The 2002 Annual Progress Report of the Local Transport Plan recognises that a taxi strategy is required in order to develop the integrated transport strategy for Bath and North East Somerset, and makes a commitment to prepare one. This document presents the results of the work that has been undertaken.

Taxis and private hire vehicles have a specific role to play in an integrated transport system. They are able to provide services in situations where public transport is either not available (for example in rural areas, or outside "normal" hours of operation such as in the evenings or on Sundays), or for those with mobility difficulties. They can also be used to provide innovative types of service such as taxi-buses. It is important, however, that taxis and private hire vehicles are seen to complement and reinforce public transport services rather than compete with them. The Bath and North East Somerset Taxi Strategy will ensure that the role of taxis is as part of an integrated transport network.

In this way, it can be seen that taxis and private hire vehicles can play an important role in fulfilling the Government's five criteria for assessing transport policies and schemes of:

- promoting accessibility to everyday facilities for all, especially those without cars;
- improving safety for all travellers;
- contributing to an efficient economy and supporting sustainable economic growth in appropriate locations; and
- promoting the integration of all forms of transport and land-use planning, leading to a better, more efficient transport system.

In addition, where taxis and private hire vehicles are able to achieve higher occupancy rates than a private car, they also assist in achieving the objective of environmental improvements.

The Government's Social Exclusion Unit published a report in February 2003 setting out the results of their work to explore and make recommendations to overcome the problems experienced by people facing social exclusion in accessing work and key services. Taxis can be seen as an

important part of the potential toolkit of solutions. By working to improve the taxi system, Bath and North East Somerset Council will be helping to address social exclusion issues in the area.

Key Objectives

By 2011 Bath and North East Somerset will strive to:

1. Ensure public safety through the continued review, updating and adoption by Bath and North East Somerset Council of the byelaws and local conditions applicable to vehicle and driver licences and compliance with these by licensees.
2. Produce, distribute and monitor feedback of a taxi and private hire vehicle information leaflet.
3. Seek to establish and maintain taxi and private hire operator liaison groups with the Council to discuss licensing, training and future measures, in Bath, Keynsham and Norton-Radstock.
4. Improve standards of driver training in particular in the area of disability awareness.
5. Encourage an increase in the number of Hackney Carriages that fully comply with the Disability Discrimination Act requirements, and monitor progress.
6. Improve the provision of taxi ranks in Bath, Keynsham and Midsomer Norton and monitor user satisfaction, to ensure they are accessible, of sufficient capacity and safe for all users.
7. Make "cashing-in" of taxi tokens by licensees much easier, and thus encourage all licensed vehicles to accept them.
8. Ensure that every major planning application takes account of provision for licensed vehicles.
9. Investigate and promote ways to reduce exhaust emissions together with the up-take of low polluting fuels, e.g. Liquid Petroleum Gas (LPG), by vehicle proprietors.
10. Improve licensed vehicle safety.
11. Continue to investigate the potential use of innovative transport schemes, and monitor the success of any implementation.
12. Review Hackney Carriage fares annually to ensure a competitive and attractive service.
13. To request a report which includes the legal position of licensing, selling and trading plates.

Source: Bath and North East Somerset Council's website:

www.bathnes.gov.uk/BathNES/transportandroads/transportationstrategy/plansandstrategies/default.htm

