

Meeting of the Advisory Committee on SPSVs – Minutes

Thursday 30th May 2024, 10.30am

Meeting Room 1

NTA, Dún Scéine, Harcourt Lane, Dublin, D02 WT20.

Present:

Chairperson	Mr. Cornelius O' Donohue
Representing:	
Small Public Service Vehicle and Driver Interests	Mr. John Murphy, Mr. Shajedul Chowdhury, Mr. Alan Cooley
Special Interest or Expertise in Matters Relating to the Functions of the Authority, the Advisory Committee, or Related Matters.	Mr. James O'Brien, Mr. Harpreet Singh Ms. Aisling Dunne
Local Authorities	Mr. Brendan O'Brien
The Interests of Tourism	Mr. Paul Keeley
The Interests of Consumers	Mr. Adrian Cummins
The Interests of Persons with Disabilities	Mr. John Fulham

Apologies:

An Garda Síochána	Superintendent Tom Murphy
The Interests of Older Persons	Ms. Mai Quaid
Small Public Service Vehicle and Driver Interests	Mr. Francis Doheny
The Interests of Business	Ms. Ann Campbell

NTA Representatives

Wendy Thompson, Roisin Cullinan, Fiona Brady, Jakub Szynal (Secretary)

DoT Representatives

Clare Finnegan, Úna McDermott

1. Committee membership

The Chair introduced new member Adrian Cummins. Adrian is the CEO of the Restaurants Association of Ireland and will represent the interests of consumers.

2. Minutes of meeting held on 25th April 2024 and actions arising

The minutes of meeting held on 25th April 2024 were agreed with no amendments.

Since the last meeting, the Chair had further communication with a company which has experience in the SPSV industry regarding a telematics presentation.

Unfortunately, this plan is unfeasible.

The National Sustainable Mobility Seminar in Portlaoise was discussed. Some members of the committee had attended and noted that it was very informative. Inclusion and accessibility needs were emphasized at the seminar and it was noted that these needs are not always physical and/or visible. It was noted that people are suffering with chronic illnesses and mental issues and may require other aids. Young people at the seminar presented interesting views, noting their concern for safety and accessible transport for the elderly.

3. Correspondence

The Chair discussed correspondence received from the Minister and NTA regarding SPSV late night service availability and WAV availability respectively. The Advisory Committee will dedicate time over the coming months working to come up with sound evidence based advices.

WT + DoT representatives joined the meeting.

4. Department of Transport representatives

The representatives from the Public Transport Regulation Division introduced themselves. The Advisory Committee work was called out as important to the Department noting that the SPSV industry always generates the most democratic process. It was noted that this Department visit is separate from the Minister's visit to be arranged later this year. The officials thanked all members on the Advisory Committee for their commitment and expertise. The advice request letter from Minister Ryan was discussed, noting that the Department can only act on available evidence and the Advisory Committee advices would assist in that. It was agreed that in terms of taxi availability, urban and rural areas will require different approaches and data. The Department is currently reviewing any amendments required to the Taxi Regulations Acts with the assistance of NTA, and if the Advisory Committee believes

that amendments need to be made to its Part of the Act, those advices will be considered.

5. NTA update

WT presented the NTA update which was previously circulated to the Advisory Committee. A licensing overview was given with a graph of vehicle and driver numbers between 2015-2024. The effects of Covid were illustrated by a sharp dip between 2020-2022, however, numbers are now nearing pre-Covid levels. Both driver and vehicle licences remain on a significant rise from their lowest points. Recovery should be measured in relation to that level, rather than the 2019 licensing figures.

There are currently 3,201 vehicles still availing of the emergency, temporary age extension regulations of 13 March 2020 to 2022. The final impact of these age extensions will end in December 2027.

Late night SPSV services were discussed. NTA confirmed its acknowledgement of the difficulty of availing of SPSVs during late night social hours of 12am-4am on weekend nights. It was reiterated that the last few years have been turbulent for the industry with Covid, the Russian-Ukraine war and Ireland's population increases. As a result, the number of drivers and vehicles on the road has not grown alongside the population as planned. Late night antisocial behaviour has turned many drivers away, with 52% of drivers who stopped working nights in the last 3 years citing the reason for this being concern for personal safety according to the latest survey. 62% of drivers stated that no money at all would bring them back to working nights.

It was also suggested, but not evidenced, that the lack of availability of SPSVs during late night economy hours could be an unintended consequence of eSPSVs as drivers could be charging their cars at night. The Advisory Committee, NTA and DoT agreed that a multi-agency approach is needed to address the public transport travel requirements of the late night economy.

WAVs were discussed. The fleet is at 21% WAV penetration, however work needs to be done to ensure WAVs are available when and where needed. The NTA Board has asked the Advisory Committee to consider how WAV need can be identified and how data on it can be collected.

It was clarified that the previous slides with licensing data per capita were all SPSVs, not just taxis. The consultant for the data is Limitel. The data sample for the maximum fare review was 1,005 consumers and 500 drivers surveyed nationwide.

RC + FB Joined the meeting.

6. Rental market

WT gave an overview of the legal rental market or any operation by a third party under Regulations 49 and 50. A vehicle licence owner can rent or lease their vehicle. When doing so, they need to ensure that the vehicle is fully licensed, insured in the vehicle owner's name and that all standards are met. This onus falls on the vehicle owner. Drivers can be insured on an open driver or named driver basis.

The vehicle owner needs to ensure that the vehicle is fully licensed, insured and that all standards are met. They also need to verify that their proposed drivers are carrying SPSV licences and that NTA is made aware of the rental arrangement.

Renting a vehicle licence (plate) on its own is prohibited as is any form of licence transfer. This information is widely available both before entering the industry in the Industry Knowledge Test and through NTA communications with industry members. To attempt to circumvent this prohibition to "buy" a saloon vehicle licence poses a very real risk to the buyer as the licence becomes void under the Taxi Regulation Act and operating attracts a court prosecution.

A point was raised regarding drivers' spouses being "pushed" into the rental market when the drivers pass away. It was noted that the spouses are not always equipped to do so or interested in doing so. It was suggested that NTA should consider a policy by which spouses in these situations can submit the vehicle licence to NTA for monetary compensation and resell the licence. It was noted a vehicle licence holder can nominate a person to take over their vehicle licence after their death (Form S15N). The Chair stated that recent advices on transferability were provided, after a protracted period of deliberation by the Committee and considering all such matters, and the topic will not be revisited any time soon.

7. Local Area Hackneys

The Chair led a whiteboard brainstorming session on Local Area Hackneys to identify benefits, negatives, and potential changes.

The Advisory Committee summed up the LAH pilot:

- The geographical area has a 5-7-10km radius (depending on area).
- Only one driver per Local Area Hackney.
- Drivers can do return journeys.
- The Pilot grant was 6,000 euro yearly (500 per month).
- The grant covers the vehicle's insurance.
- 50 euro for vehicle licence, 20 euro for driver licence with full AGS vetting.
- 20 hours per week (including Fridays and Saturdays).
- 40 weeks per year, 12 weeks off.
- No set fares, no cashless – fees agreed.
- Have to be available for big local events/nights.
- Drivers go to local authority to confirm what services are available and identify what areas could be served by a hackney.

- Compliance Officer partnered with each LAH driver.

In total, 19 LAH services are operating nationwide. Only two from the 2019/23 Pilots are operating out of 36 LAH licences offered.

The meeting contemplated why this pilot was unsuccessful. One suggestion was that the LAH grant is less desirable than an SPSV grant. The Local Link's success was mentioned, noting that its day services could be unintentionally impacting on LAHs. It was also suggested that the 5-7-10km radius might be too small to work within. The Advisory Committee noted that having more than one driver per vehicle could make LAHs more desirable. This was in light of a discussion at the April meeting, where it was noted that pub owners are using a vehicle to drop customers home. With the backing of the hospitality industry, there could be potential for a revisited LAH scheme. NTA representatives noted that the 1:1 rule was historically an AGS requirement. This was put on the agenda for NTA's next meeting with AGS to see if any changes can be made.

Community cars were discussed. These vehicles are exempt from SPSV regulations, having volunteer drivers and no fares. The passenger may contribute towards the fuel, parking and tolls. Only 6 are in operation nationwide. As a result, it is unlikely that community cars are infringing upon LAH's success.

The choice of areas for the LAH pilot was discussed. NTA did groundwork liaising with councillors, senators, and TDs. Areas were chosen based on the feedback, having 81 areas in mind initially before whittling it down to 30. As aforementioned, take-up rates were very low.

At the beginning of next year, the Smart DRT pilot will begin. This will be demand responsive, with flexibility and a semi-schedule. There are 3 pilot areas chosen. The work involved is frontloaded so expanding upon it will not be an issue. The scope for demand is being revisited for it, with specific emphasis on local citizens and isolation.

LAHs were discussed in context of advertising. LAHs work on a private arrangement basis with the intention of fostering a community development network. An LAH driver has a responsibility to promote their service. This could be done through social media, notice boards, tourist pages etc. The Advisory Committee discussed the potential of a TFI card/leaflet to show passengers that their driver is registered.

It was raised that LAHs could be convenient for retired people, stay at home parents or students looking for flexible working hours. They could also be useful for creches.

Insurance for LAHs was discussed, noting that it generally ranges from 1,760-3,600 euro. There will always be exceptions to this when the insured has been involved in collisions. It was also noted that the full premium always has to be paid even if LAH drivers work limited hours.

The Advisory Committee queried if more scope was possible for the LAH, through the potential backing of hospitality in line with the Nighttime Economy revival project. Further discussion on LAH will take place at next month's meeting.

The Nighttime Economy and Road Safety items were deferred for discussion at the next Advisory Committee meeting.

8. AOB

Date of next meeting – Thursday 27th June 2024, 10.30