

## Meeting of the Advisory Committee on SPSVs

Thursday 3<sup>rd</sup> October 2024, 10.30am-12.30pm

Meeting Room 1

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

### Minutes

**Present:**

<b>Chairperson</b>	Mr. Cornelius O' Donohue
Representing:	
<b>Small Public Service Vehicle and Driver Interests</b>	Mr. Francis Doheny Mr. Alan Cooley Mr. Shajedul Chowdhury
<b>Special Interest or Expertise in Matters Relating to the Functions of the Authority, the Advisory Committee, or Related Matters.</b>	Mr. Harpreet Singh Ms. Aisling Dunne
<b>The Interests of Older Persons</b>	Ms. Mai Quaid
<b>The Interests of Persons with Disabilities</b>	Mr. John Fulham

**Apologies:**

<b>The interests of Tourism</b>	Mr. Paul Keeley
<b>Local Authorities</b>	Mr. Brendan O'Brien
<b>Small Public Service Vehicle and Driver Interests</b>	Mr. John Murphy
<b>The Interests of Consumers</b>	Mr. Adrian Cummins
<b>An Garda Síochána</b>	Superintendent Tom Murphy
<b>Special Interest or Expertise in Matters Relating to the Functions of the Authority,</b>	Mr. James O'Brien

<b>the Advisory Committee, or Related Matters.</b>	
<b>The Interests of Business</b>	Ms. Ann Campbell

**NTA Representatives:**

In Attendance: Mr. Jakub Szynal, *Secretary to the Advisory Committee on SPSVs.*

Partial Attendance: Ms. Fiona Brady, *Head of Regulatory Compliance.*

**Taxis for Ireland Coalition Representatives:**

Partial Attendance: Mr. Kieran Harte, Mr. Donal O’Keeffe, Mr. Brian Caulfield, Mr. Conor Spain.

**Irish Wheelchair Association Representatives:**

Partial Attendance: Ms. Joan Carthy

### **10.30am Advisory Committee**

#### **1. Minutes of meeting held on 25<sup>th</sup> July 2024 and actions arising.**

The Chair welcomed the Members of the Advisory Committee, expressing his thanks to all who were able to attend this rescheduled meeting.

The minutes of the meeting held on the 25<sup>th</sup> July 2024 were agreed with no amendments.

The removal of the insurance levy in the budget was discussed and noted as a potential discussion point regarding SPSVs.

### **10.50am Advisory Committee and NTA**

#### **2. NTA update**

NTA gave an update on the SPSV statistics for August. The approval of the National Maximum Fare Review was discussed, noting that work is underway for taxi meter recalibration.

An overview of the licensing and vehicle statistics were given, acknowledging steady growth in licenses and a slower growth in vehicle numbers this year. The Advisory Committee queried the discrepancy between the number of licenses and vehicles. It was noted that driver licenses last for 5 years, whereas vehicle licenses last for 1 year.

The Advisory Committee discussed the costs associated with purchasing a taxi, noting that there have been anecdotal reports of drivers being charged around €80,000 for vehicles. The Committee queried if price gauging is occurring as a result of the availability of the WAV grant. The meeting noted that evidence would need to be gathered on this, and that drivers should be vigilant about trading in their vehicles. It was also noted that vehicle costs need to be reduced, discussing the possibility of additional grants or VRT reduction.

Compliance statistics were discussed. Zone 18 at Dublin Airport was discussed, with concerns being raised over drivers using it as a taxi rank. DAA operates on its own set of by-laws and required specific permits from drivers, which they enforce.

## **11.15am – 11.45am Advisory Committee and Taxis for Ireland Coalition**

### **3. *Taxis for Ireland presentation on SPSV supply/demand***

The Chair welcomed the representatives of Taxis for Ireland Coalition (TFIC) to the meeting, introducing the Members and explaining the function of the Advisory Committee on SPSVs.

The TFIC gave a presentation to the Advisory Committee, in which they noted that engagement with the taxi industry in the Irish market is on a decline, whereas in other countries, taxi engagement is increasing. They stated that Ireland is a clear outlier amongst its peer countries.

TFIC proposed solutions to address this problem. In their submission, they called upon the Minister and NTA to create a vision and strategy for SPSVs. They highlighted that taxis are not seen as a public transport option despite being a key element of the transport eco-system.

TFIC reverted to a number of recommendations set out in their submission. One of the recommendations to identify unmet demand is to use dispatch operators to measure booking data, noting that NTA may have authorisation to get this information. They noted that in order to address any unmet demand, the industry has to grow and more vehicles and drivers are needed. There is growing demand in the population and a growing amount of people engaging with taxi apps.

In further recommendations, TFIC acknowledged the need to reduce barriers for aspiring taxi drivers. They noted that due to the requirement of new drivers acquiring WAVs, drivers often must purchase a new vehicle instead of using their own. Furthermore, the TFIC called for the local area knowledge test to be reviewed, citing the 37% average pass rate. With the widespread adoption of tech like sat nav, the TFIC believe that this test is outdated.

The Advisory Committee discussed the local area knowledge test, noting that a balance must be struck to ensure each driver is adequately educated and that a high standard is maintained in the taxi industry, as anyone sitting through the test and passing it is likely to be more serious about the work. The TFIC noted that most countries are moving away from this standard of test in favour of satellite navigation, emphasizing the ease of access it provides with live traffic information. It was also emphasized by the TFIC that the test should be reviewed for its relevance today, and other forms of training, such as road safety and WAV training could be beneficial in lieu of this test.

The TFIC noted the benefit of taxi apps providing data insight into the percentage of WAV requested trips that go unfulfilled. It was noted that many WAV registered drivers accept many trips without WAV passengers, and that the disparity needs to be

pinpointed. It was queried whether it would be possible to subsidise WAV drivers, accounting for the time that it might take to get wheelchair users in and out of the vehicle. Taxi apps have the data, and it should be accessible through confidential dispatch information. The TFIC called upon NTA to establish that mechanism.

The nighttime economy was discussed in the context of taxi availability. TFIC noted that before Covid-19, taxi demand emerged on streets between 2.30-3.30 am. Post Covid-19, consumer habits have changed, and people tend to go out earlier and return home earlier. It was stressed that people are not comfortable on the streets late at night waiting for a taxi. While there is a public transport system operating in the late-night social hours, it does not cater to everyone and most prefer being delivered as close to home as possible.

TFIC emphasized that bars are emptying out from 1 am onwards as people try to secure a chance of getting a taxi or public transport home, and that has a damaging impact on the hospitality sector which needs to be addressed by policy. It was noted that the lack of taxi availability, lack of AGS visibility and Dublin City centre's reputation need to be addressed as a whole of government issue. The TFIC called upon the NTA to look into targeted surveys for users and drivers, on a higher scale than before, and base decisions on those findings.

The TFIC noted that similar issues are faced in Cork City, where people are leaving pubs at 11pm to catch the last bus home, and that confidence in the taxi supply has collapsed. The meeting agreed that it is not entirely a taxi solution, and that generally, public transport in rural areas does not operate on a late-night schedule. It was noted however, people will go out late at night provided there is adequate transport infrastructure in place, as evidenced by a successful volunteer-based programme in Cork and Kerry which transported people to pubs and community centres every day of the week. This programme still operates in Kerry to this day.

Local Area Hackneys were discussed. The TFIC queried as to why the driver limit for LAH's is capped at one person. If the cap was removed, it would allow multiple people to fulfil that role. Other solutions were discussed, noting that an app would be very beneficial for LAHs as it is otherwise mostly phone call based, and not every driver might want their phone number displayed around town.

TFIC noted the importance of a regulatory structure response to meet high demand pinch points. The hospitality and retail sectors were listed as examples – when demand increases around specific times of year or events, extra part time workers are brought in to satisfy that demand. Similar should be achieved within the SPSV industry as the Irish population has grown significantly over the past few years.

The Chair had acknowledged the improved engagement between the Advisory Committee on SPSVs, NTA and DoT over the past few years, stressing the importance of cooperation.

The meeting discussed the growing demand of Dublin City and the importance of integrating taxis into the public transport system. It was acknowledged that public transport cannot fulfil certain trips, and taxis are an effective way of bridging that gap. It was agreed however, by the meeting, that this is a multifaceted issue and will require a whole of government approach to aid the hospitality sector, to create a safer urban environment and to ensure that demand for transport is met.

#### **11.45am – 12.15pm Advisory Committee and Irish Wheelchair Association**

#### ***4. ILMI presentation on SPSV supply/demand***

The Chair introduced Joan Carthy, the National Advocacy Manager at the Irish Wheelchair Association. JC opened her presentation on SPSV supply and demand by reference to Article 19 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (attached), going on to emphasise the issues faced by persons with disabilities accessing SPSV services.

JC noted that there is a lack of data available regarding wheelchair users. For instance, the national census does not ask households about wheelchair usage, making it difficult to ascertain the number of wheelchair users in Ireland. More data would allow more informed policy decisions.

The meeting raised a point regarding the WAV grant, noting that those who receive the WAV grant must undertake the WAV training, while those who rent WAV vehicles do not have to. This results in drivers operating WAVs and not having enough training to secure wheelchairs into their vehicles. JC highlighted how often persons with wheelchairs get turned away by taxis and hackneys, which has caused a huge distrust towards SPSV services.

Several recommendations to remedy these issues were proffered. IWA would recommend household surveys undertaken by the CSO on a weekly basis to increase the amount of data available for policy making. Technology and smart meters should be considered for SPSVs to collect data and to get a greater awareness of SPSV availability. Another suggestion was to consider HSE data on hackney contracts and ascertain how many journeys are required per driver.

Due to the level of information required for SPSV complaints, persons with disabilities often do not file them. JC noted that the reason for this is that it is difficult to secure the details of a driver who refuse to take on a WAV passenger. It was queried whether NTA could implement an app-based complaint system where incidents can be easily and quickly reported.

The availability of taxis was discussed, noting that there is too much focus on unmet need. IWA noted that people with disabilities are part of all figures, and there needs to be whole of government approach to ensure 100% accessibility.

The complaints procedure was discussed again, noting the need for more options, notably - the ability to flag lack of availability and cancelling. JC also highlighted that these issues persist in both rural and urban areas. Public transport is often difficult to use by wheelchair users due to limited capacity on buses and difficulty accessing trains. Taxis are often the only option, which causes significant isolation.

The meeting noted that the reintroduction of saloon cars into the industry could cause current WAV figures to fade. Suggestions of incentives, smart meters and grants to increase WAV availability were discussed.

The ultimate goal is to strive towards an environment that is all inclusive which will require a multifaceted and whole of government approach. There is significant media coverage on WAVs, however, issues such as the receding late-night economy and cost of living crisis need to be addressed too.

The cost of purchasing WAV taxis was discussed.

The meeting agreed that accessibility in Ireland will require a multifaceted approach and collaboration from various government bodies. In terms of SPSVs, more data on wheelchair users in the country, and more data regarding SPSV availability and more data on unfulfilled trips needs to be accessed to help shape policy decisions.

## **5. Road safety**

Due to time constraints, discussions on road safety will be deferred until the next meeting.

## **6. AOB**

The Chair had asked if the Advisory Committee if there was any other business to discuss, there was none.

**Date of next meeting – Thursday 31<sup>st</sup> October 2024, 10.30.**

## UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

### **Article 19 - Living Independently and Being Included in the Community**

States Parties to the present Convention recognize the equal right of all persons with disabilities to live in the community, with choices equal to others, and shall take effective and appropriate measures to facilitate full enjoyment by persons with disabilities of this right and their full inclusion and participation in the community, including by ensuring that:

- (a) Persons with disabilities have the opportunity to choose their place of residence and where and with whom they live on an equal basis with others and are not obliged to live in a particular living arrangement;
- (b) Persons with disabilities have access to a range of in-home, residential and other community support services, including personal assistance necessary to support living and inclusion in the community, and to prevent isolation or segregation from the community;
- (c) Community services and facilities for the general population are available on an equal basis to persons with disabilities and are responsive to their needs.