

Transport Committee

Oral evidence: [Licensing of taxis and private hire vehicles](#), HC 1224

Wednesday 15 October 2025

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[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Ruth Cadbury (Chair); Steff Aquarone; Dr Scott Arthur; Mrs Elsie Blundell; Olly Glover; Alex Mayer; Baggy Shanker; Laurence Turner.

Questions 23–75

Witnesses

[II](#): Helen Chapman, Director of Licensing and Regulation, Transport for London; David Pattison, Chief Operating Officer, City of Wolverhampton Council; Lee Petrak, Public Protection Commercial Enforcement Manager, Blackpool Council.

Written evidence from witnesses:

- [Transport for London](#)
- [City of Wolverhampton Council](#)
- [Blackpool Council](#)

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Helen Chapman, David Pattison and Lee Petrak.

Q23 **Chair:** Welcome to our second panel. Could I ask our witnesses to introduce themselves, starting with Helen?

Helen Chapman: I am the director of licensing and regulation at Transport for London.

David Pattison: I am the chief operating officer at the City of Wolverhampton council.

Lee Petrak: I am the commercial enforcement manager for Blackpool council with responsibility for licensing.

Q24 **Alex Mayer:** We heard in the previous evidence session that there appear to be around 230 different sets of conditions being applied to drivers. What are your views on the case for introducing national minimum licensing standards for taxis and private hire vehicles? What scope, if any, do you think should remain for local variation?

Helen Chapman: We would support national minimum standards for taxi and private hire vehicles and feel that those standards should be set at a high level because we are regulating for public and passenger safety. We want to make sure that people are safe, and that they know what to expect when they are getting into a taxi or a private hire vehicle.

We feel it is important that licensing authorities have the ability to go above those standards and depart from them. It may be necessary to look at local conditions, and think about vehicle standards and emissions. London is incredibly complex, and we want to make sure drivers understand all their obligations and that those obligations are set at a high level.

David Pattison: I agree that national standards are critical. We think there should be standard licence conditions and requirements.

I would slightly disagree with Helen. If you have consistency, it should be everywhere, and the public expect that. They want to know that if they get into a private hire in Berwick-upon-Tweed or in Penzance, they will have the same level of standard. I can see the case for a slight difference in relation to hackneys in some areas, but I am less convinced about it with private hire. Uniform standards, and uniform fees, are key; that will change a lot of the issues that we have.

Lee Petrak: I echo those comments completely. National standards would be very welcome in Blackpool. In addition, I would like to see a fixed fee set by Government in a similar way to licensing, although that is linked to the rateable value of premises. There is definitely a place for national standards across the country for the sake of consistency. We



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heard this morning about the number of variations in conditions, and it is an absurdity that there are so many different variables in the equation.

Q25 **Alex Mayer:** Do you feel that they will be practically enforceable?

Lee Petrak: Enforcement is at the root of a lot of the problems that we have with the current framework. Operational enforcement is a huge challenge. At the moment, we have a challenge in the operational enforcement of national conditions in respect of statutory offending and condition breaches.

Condition breaches are the complicated part because, from a local point of view, they simply do not exist any more. Localism has been completely taken away. From an enforcement point of view, with the principles the previous panel mentioned, we need a national enforcement organisation, or standard, or something of that ilk. I think you would link the two together. Having the confidence to be able to manage enforcement issues, whether they are offending or national conditions, for any vehicle that comes into our local or regional area has to be the way forward. It simply has to.

Q26 **Alex Mayer:** David or Helen, anything to add to that?

David Pattison: The key here is what those standards are. If you follow Department for Transport best practice and guidance, which we do, then you have clear levels that make a lot of sense. You also need extra enforcement powers. If you have standard levels and conditions for things like fixed penalty notices, you can then take action and make sure it can be done regardless of which licensing area it is in or who it is licensed with. You have that power across the board. The key thing for us all, and particularly our council, is that it is about public safety. It is about making sure we give the public the confidence that they are safe, whether it is your 12-year-old daughter who gets into a vehicle or whoever.

Helen Chapman: I agree, so I will not labour the point too much. Strengthening enforcement capabilities of licensing authorities is really important and needs to be done. We also need to think about national enforcement powers.

Q27 **Chair:** None of you believes there should be local conditions, except possibly for black cabs. Lee, you said that standardised conditions might not be practically enforceable. What sort of conditions would you be worried about?

Lee Petrak: I think it was in the context that if we have a set of national standard conditions, there is less or even no scope for local conditions that might, in reality, have been well-intentioned when written down but are not practical in terms of enforceability.

Q28 **Chair:** Is there anything you want to add, Helen?



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Helen Chapman: I want to clarify that, while we support national minimum standards, we believe it is important for local authorities to have the ability to set standards on top of that. A good example is that we have vehicle emission standards in London, which we understand might not be appropriate to set in other licensing authority areas.

Q29 **Chair:** Do they not apply to all vehicles anyway?

Helen Chapman: We have vehicle age limits for taxis and private hire vehicles, and zero emission capable vehicle requirements. We understand these are important for London's air quality but may not be so relevant in a smaller area.

Chair: Let us turn to out-of-area licensing, about which we heard a lot in the last session.

Q30 **Mrs Blundell:** The next few questions relate to out-of-area working, and I am going to direct the first one to Mr Petrak but I will then invite the other two of you to come in. What impact would you say out-of-area working has had on safety and public confidence in Blackpool?

Lee Petrak: Somebody asked recently if it was possible to tell how many licensed vehicles there were in an area. Of course, I could only give them the figure for the number of vehicles licensed with Blackpool. It is impossible for us to know exactly how many we have that frequent the area. It links back to having national standards. The fact is that our expectations are from an enforcement point of view, and enforcement is at the root of this. The flow of vehicles in and out of the border is really difficult for us to control. We cannot control it at all.

Is it all right if I refer back to my notes on the original question?

Q31 **Mrs Blundell:** Yes, and I will tell you why I asked it. My area is also in the north-west, as you can hear from my accent. It is in Rochdale borough: my constituency is Heywood and Middleton North, which is in Greater Manchester. It sounds like we face similar challenges in this area, and we want to see reform of out-of-area working to address safety concerns, in particular. It seems that you cannot keep track of it at all in terms of the vehicles coming into your area.

Lee Petrak: No, you cannot keep track of it at all. We are now at a stage where provisions on where an operator can operate vehicles do not seem to matter. We are not even in a position where an operator has to have an operating licence everywhere it operates; it does not.

Uber has already been referenced today, and it is probably not going to be the last time, but the size of the organisation means that it could, in theory, do what it is doing on one operating licence, which is just absurd. It is crazy to think that that could happen. Perhaps operators should be accountable in every area that they operate.



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The position that I am uncomfortable with, perhaps from a slightly different perspective, is that we license Uber now as well. Those vehicles, along with any of our other operators, could be operating anywhere. That is not a position that I am comfortable with, because I know the limitations of my operational enforcement resource. The idea that we could be chasing vehicles all over the country is not something we could deal or cope with. From that perspective, it gives me some cause for concern.

Q32 Mrs Blundell: It does sound completely lawless. Should the Government change the law in this area to allow authorities to limit or refuse out-of-area applicants?

Lee Petrak: To try to limit use is one possible option. This new model that, for want of a better expression, has exploited principles of cross-border hiring and sub-contracting is liked by the consumer because of the way they obtain these services, hence the growth of the company. It is obviously very lucrative for them.

When I was struggling to get to sleep last night it crossed my mind that every time I have this conversation we talk about the frustration with drivers and conflict between hackney carriage trade and private hire trade. Is there a case for more accountability for operators? Looking at the way operators are licensed, there is no statutory definition of what a fit and proper operator is. The only test that we have, courtesy of Mr Button, is around the principles of how they handle personal data. Given where we are, and how much freedom some of these operators have to operate nationally, should they be more accountable?

When we talk about the problems we have with enforcement in Blackpool, which Mr Lawrie mentioned earlier this morning, it is a common thread that we have problems with some private hire drivers taking liberties by ranking where they should not rank, ranking at all, being close to ranks, and taking themselves out of the definition of a private hire and into the definition of a hackney carriage. Whenever we look at that as an authority, we look at it from the individual perspective of the driver. It is virtually impossible to monitor that as a local if they are not your vehicles. Should there be more accountability for the operators? That is the point I am trying to make, because, essentially, they are the ones sitting on all the information and data about where the vehicles are.

Q33 Mrs Blundell: Ms Chapman or Mr Pattison, do you have any comments on that?

David Pattison: Our position is slightly different. We have ended up having a large number of drivers apply for, and get, licences with us who do not live in Wolverhampton.

Q34 Mrs Blundell: Why do you think that is?



David Pattison: I was going to come on to that. It is because of the way we have done it; we have had fees and an efficient system. We have followed the Department for Transport guidance almost to the letter in terms of best practice, and there has then been growth for a number of reasons.

One thing I want to say clearly is that we have always prioritised public safety. The problem we have is that we cannot refuse drivers without a connection to the city unless they are not fit and proper. We are not able to say, "You live in Berwick-upon-Tweed or Rochdale, so we are not going to grant you a licence." We would be acting unlawfully.

We follow those public safety angles carefully and it is something our councillors feel strongly about. We make sure that we follow Department for Transport guidance as closely as possible and take everything seriously, including enforcement. However, because there are no uniform standards or fees across the nation, we are in a difficult place. If they are fit and proper and meet all the key standards, we cannot refuse people simply because we are getting more licences than we would wish to have.

Because we have become much bigger, we have taken the opportunity to try to be innovative in the way we do enforcement. We have daily DBS checks; we have introduced additional checks on things like ghost plates, which avoid ANPR cameras; we have additional checks on people's driving licences so, if you have a Wolverhampton badge, someone can tap their phone on it and see if it is valid or not. It is the same level of technology that is used by UK Border Force.

We have tried to use that additional growth to make sure that we are doubling down even more strongly on public safety, but the challenge we have is that the law is not fit for purpose. The law is too old. What Lee is talking about was not envisioned in 1976: a change in the world in terms of operators, app models and the way we work. We need, and are asking for, the law to change. We do not want to be in this position. We never asked for it; it has come to us and we would like it to change.

Q35 **Mrs Blundell:** To build on the point you were making, 96% of the drivers you license do not live in Wolverhampton, and you think that is down to your efficiency as a licensing authority rather than anything related to standards.

David Pattison: It is definitely not standards. We are really proud. We are always open to suggestions, but our guidelines relating to relevance of convictions—our standards for fit and proper—are stronger than the Department for Transport's guidance. They are very close to it but, in some respects, are stronger. We take it really seriously.

We have a strong approach to safeguarding. If we get a safeguarding concern raised with us, we will investigate it and decide what we need to do within one day. We have a key performance indicator on that. We



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publish all our data. We never asked for this, but we take the responsibility seriously.

Fit and proper is something we care about passionately. It is about protecting the public, and we are here to protect the public. As was mentioned earlier, that includes the trade. It is something we take seriously.

Q36 Mrs Blundell: Sorry to interrupt, but I had a quick google this morning and if I wanted to get a licence in Wolverhampton, I could go online and get one for £49 for the year or £98 for three years, which is quite a good deal. If I wanted to buy one where I live, it would cost me £255.

The GMB union, which we heard from on the previous panel, has described Wolverhampton council as "a licence factory...creaking at the seams". How would you respond to that characterisation, and what assurances would you give in relation to that, thinking in particular about safety?

David Pattison: The fees have gone up from that level; it is currently £69 for a new driver. The key point here is that we are not allowed to make a profit. If we get fees in, over a three-year period, we have to invest them, and if we have more fees coming in than we spend, we have to reduce the fees. That is the challenge. We need uniform fees.

Q37 Chair: So it is not like other areas of transport policy, where you allocate excess income elsewhere in transport; it has to be completely ringfenced.

David Pattison: Yes, and actually also within those areas, be it drivers' licences or within private hire vehicles. Your point about creaking at the seams is interesting.

Mrs Blundell: It is the GMB union's point.

David Pattison: I know. My point is that there are some who say that we are being too lax, which is absolutely not the case. We are strong on our standards. It takes the time it takes to make sure people are fit and proper. GMB's concern was that it was taking too long to determine. Our position is that we will make sure we only license those who are fit and proper. They will do their full day of testing in person and go through lots of information. Over 55% of people who go for a licence fail at Wolverhampton, so we have really strong standards and we will take the time we take.

We are trying to do it as efficiently as we can and, in fact, we do it efficiently. We publish details on our website: if you go on the website today, you will see which licence dates we are dealing with. It sometimes takes a bit longer if we need a good conduct certificate from someone in Eritrea, which takes longer than doing checks for people who have spent all their time in the UK. We are determined to make sure that public safety is No. 1, and that is our approach.



Q38 Mrs Blundell: Sorry, I felt I was being discourteous there, but I did want to follow up with Mr Pattison about Wolverhampton. Helen, do you have any comments on any of that?

Helen Chapman: We think cross-border hiring is a significant problem that licensing authorities up and down the country are facing. It cannot be right, from a passenger perspective, that you stand in central London, open an app, and a driver licensed by a completely different authority comes along. I do not think that is what a passenger would anticipate would be happening—and vice versa. We have 105,000 licensed private hire drivers in London, and I am sure that not all of them are working in London.

I agree with the comment about fees. You have to ensure that you are not making a surplus on fees, but there is a significant amount of hidden cost that goes into taxi and private hire in both licensing and enforcement. As a licensing authority, if you are enforcing, or attempting to enforce, because you do not have the same powers against an out-of-town vehicle, then all that cost is sitting with you as a licensing authority. That is really difficult.

We have long since seen that this is a problem. It has been a problem for a very long time. We examined the issue in some detail in 2018, and we wrote a policy paper with proposals that are called the ABBA requirements—A to B and B to A. I recognise that there would need to be some level of exemption to that—we heard this morning about chauffeur services—but by and large that policy paper sets out exactly how it can work and has looked at the issue in detail.

Q39 Baggy Shanker: David, I am a former council cabinet member responsible for licensing and a former council leader. Many drivers in Derby come to me and say, “We will go to Wolverhampton. It is cheaper, quicker and easier.” It really worries me why that is. What steps have you taken to discourage so many applications in Wolverhampton?

David Pattison: The problem is that, legally, we have to accept someone if they meet the requirements.

Q40 Chair: Is this the result of the 2015 deregulation?

David Pattison: I am not sure that it is necessarily. It is a change in society, particularly with the growth of apps. There was also a significant growth in our number of drivers following covid. During the covid period, some authorities were not focusing on licensing and, therefore, were not granting them, so in order to be able to drive, some drivers were not going to their local authority but coming to us.

What have we done? We have been absolutely clear. We brought external lawyers in to audit everything that we were doing and asked what more we could lawfully do. We have gone through every single line of the Department for Transport guidance and followed it all. We asked whether



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there was anything we could do to dissuade, any barriers we could put in place, and have followed that guidance.

The key thing for me to say here is that we have done everything within our power and public safety. They have to come along and do the day test, and 55% of drivers fail it. We have standards that are higher than many other authorities in relation to—

Q41 **Baggy Shanker:** Any local knowledge tests?

David Pattison: Not in terms of the area because the Department for Transport guidance says that you should not have them for private hire vehicles. Best practice advice from the Department for Transport says that because it is private hire, which you book in advance, you can use your sat nav to help you.

Q42 **Baggy Shanker:** Other authorities have that though, do they not?

David Pattison: The Department for Transport says that that is not good practice. This comes back to one of the key issues: we do not have uniform standards. Uniform standards is key. We are doing everything within our power to make sure that when someone gets into a cab, be it my child or my elderly father, I can have confidence that the driver is a person who is fit and proper and doing the right things.

We are strong on enforcement. We have done over 400 operations this year, 15 other authorities have delegated authority from us to enforce on our behalf, and I am open to anyone else doing that as well. I am all ears about anything else we can do to improve on public safety. It is something we care passionately about.

The key for us is that the law needs to change. We have never invited applications from out of area. In fact, we have asked them not to do it. However, the problem we have is that they are saying, "We come to you"—

Q43 **Baggy Shanker:** Do you accept you can do more, though? A local knowledge test being one example.

David Pattison: One can always do more. If someone tells us where they think we are not doing enough, then we will happily look at that. At the moment, the evidence we have is that we are following the Department for Transport guidance. We are trying to take action on everything that we are listening to.

The key point here is that our hands are tied by not being able to refuse out of area. We are asking people not to do it. We are making sure that everyone has to do their training in Wolverhampton. We are happy to be audited against our standards and, in fact, have been externally audited against them. We are really strong. There are a lot of views out there, not necessarily with evidence. If you go through the lines in our policies



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against the Department for Transport's guidance, we follow it really carefully.

Baggy Shanker: I think there is more that can be done.

Q44 **Chair:** So if there was a triple lock mechanism, where driver, operator and vehicle all had to be registered locally, you would support that.

David Pattison: As to what the answer is for the current situation, I am not sure it is necessarily reinforcing it. Something needs to change. Fundamentally, something needs to change. We need national standards, national fees, national ability to enforce—much more of a national system but administered locally. That is my view.

Q45 **Chair:** To clarify, you found yourself unexpectedly in the position—

David Pattison: Yes.

Chair: It was not one you sought and is not one you are seeking to retain.

David Pattison: Yes, 100%. To be honest, we do not want to be in this position because it has quite an impact on us as an authority. As I said, 96% of the drivers we are licensing are outside Wolverhampton. We want to focus our efforts on the great people of our brilliant city of Wolverhampton. We are doing what we need to do to make sure we meet our legal obligations but we do not want to be in this position.

Q46 **Baggy Shanker:** We all understand that you cannot make a profit from licensing fees, but on what basis are you setting them? Historical trends? How many drivers you have in your area? Surely, with that amount of drivers applying for a licence in Wolverhampton, unless some huge salaries are being paid the fee must be even less than that. The amount of money coming in must be incredible.

David Pattison: That is the challenge. At one point, the fees went down. The fees have gone up by over £20 in the last year. It has gone from £49 to £69. It is the first fee increase for some time.

We are trying hard to make sure that we are spending the money on public safety. That is why we are doing enforcement throughout the country and are keen to find other ways to make sure we are spending the money efficiently on public safety. It is public safety. That is why I talked about the ghost plates and about us using the same technology as UK Border Force.

We are trying to find ways to make sure that we can give assurance to the public that they are safe when they get in those vehicles. We had the first dedicated taxi safeguarding officer. We have that key performance indicator on safeguarding. We have all these things that we do, but our hands are tied because we cannot refuse someone who does not have a connection to the city if they are fit and proper. That is the challenge.



Q47 Laurence Turner: I have some follow-up questions for Mr Pattison. The first is about financing. You said that you are not allowed to make a profit but any surplus, as I understand it, goes into a reserve account, which in 2023 stood at £2 million. Presumably, that counts towards the authority's overall balance sheet. Is there some advantage that can be derived from that?

David Pattison: No, there is not. If we have a surplus, we have to be able to show that we are spending it on the industry, private hire and so on; otherwise, we have to reduce the fees. The Supreme Court case of Hemming, and others, are really clear on that. It is not £2 million; it has gone down significantly. We are rightly subject to a lot of transparency and scrutiny on this. We can have a certain amount of money in reserve for a situation, but it never goes into our general fund so it never helps our challenges on adult social care or other things. It cannot be used to subsidise other parts of the council's operations. One of the misnomers out there is that we are using this to help balance our books: we are not, and we absolutely cannot.

Q48 Laurence Turner: I understand that point, but for absolute clarity, when the authority's annual statement of accounts is published, is that reserve funding counted towards the net balance sum?

David Pattison: It is technically within the general fund reserve but we recognise it as earmarked reserve. Therefore, we would not count it effectively as part of our 5% CIPFA—making sure we have a general fund balance in place.

Q49 Laurence Turner: You said that you were proud of Wolverhampton's standards. Would you accept, though, that where there are discretionary standards to be set, because Wolverhampton is now such a dominant licensing authority, other local authorities feel that they cannot go above Wolverhampton's standards? I will give a practical example. In 2019, Birmingham city council proposed raising the allowed age of private hire vehicles. They said at the time that this was to make their policy consistent with that of the City of Wolverhampton council. If Birmingham introduced a lower age limit, it would create an incentive for Birmingham drivers to acquire licences in Wolverhampton.

David Pattison: This comes back to the key point about uniform standards across the board. What we do is follow the Department for Transport guidance exactly. Generally, it advises against age limits except for certain types of vehicle. We follow that. In fact, our general position is that the age restriction on a vehicle is 11 years and 6 months. The key thing here is that those vehicles are subject to rigorous inspection to make sure that they are safe. If not, then obviously they are suspended.

You are right that because we have over 50,000 licences out of a national number of around 380,000 we have an influence on the sector. The way we approach it is by making sure we follow Department for Transport



guidance closely and, obviously, consulting with our trade, because they are a key part of our decisions. Ultimately, following Department for Transport guidance is the right approach for us, but we think there should be uniform standards.

Q50 Laurence Turner: If I may press you on this, as I am sure you will understand, MPs—those of us who are local to the region, and others across the country—come across Wolverhampton licensing issues frequently. Looking at some published statistics, 100% of taxis licenced by Wolverhampton are wheelchair accessible. For private hire vehicles it is 0.2%. The West Midlands, on paper, now has the lowest share of any region and that is because of the Wolverhampton effect. If some standards were raised above DFT recommendations, would that not have the effect of reducing the number of applications you receive and help resolve some of the problems you have said that you would rather do without?

David Pattison: Yes. In terms of accessibility, 100% of our hackney carriages are accessible in Wolverhampton. In terms of private hire vehicles, following Department for Transport guidance, it is a challenge. If we put artificial barriers into the trade then we will have challenge back. It is something I am open to. We are always happy to take away and consider whether we could do more or do it differently.

Public safety is No. 1. I agree: I want to have more accessible vehicles for the public because, for a lot of people, private hire plays an important role as a form of public transport that no one else can help satisfy, as the bus service might not be available or they might not have access to their own vehicle. I absolutely get that. That is where we work with the operators to try to encourage it, but the vehicles are significantly more expensive. We have heard about the trade, and talked about barriers to trade. We are happy to look at that and it is something that we will take away.

Q51 Dr Arthur: Language is important here, I guess. I find it incredible that you talk about providing accessible vehicles as being a barrier to trade. I am sure there will be people in Wolverhampton who are not happy with that phraseology.

On the wider point about providing a safer service to people right across the region, you had the option of providing the knowledge test and reducing the maximum permitted age of vehicles—both safety measures, fundamentally, that passengers would benefit from. Other local authorities are taking a lead on this, but you are choosing just to stick with the minimum standard set by the DFT. It seems that you could be doing more. Is this on the risk register for you as a local authority?

David Pattison: Just to be clear, what I was saying is that accessible vehicles tend to cost more money, and we heard concerns in the earlier session about the cost of those vehicles.

Q52 Dr Arthur: Is that why you have 11-and-a-half-year-old vehicles on your



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licences—vehicles that are, frankly, quite old and will not have the most modern safety standards and so on?

David Pattison: In relation to those vehicles, we are following the line from the Department for Transport. This comes back to the key point: to make sure that we are trying to have uniform standards across the board, so that there is an expectation from the public that if they are get into a private hire vehicle anywhere in the country, they know it is safe.

On accessible vehicles, we absolutely want to make sure that there is accessibility across the board, but that is something we will talk to DFT and our trade about, as we will always do. We are passionate about making sure that there is accessibility for our residents, from whichever background they are, if they have a disability and so on, and again, that is something we will take away and have a look at.

Q53 **Dr Arthur:** Yes, and as well as talking to the trade and the DFT, you should speak to residents about what their needs are.

David Pattison: Absolutely.

Q54 **Dr Arthur:** I get that there is more to disability than wheelchair accessibility. I was going to ask about the ability to enforce on drivers from outside the area, but it seems that right from the start you have all been saying that that is something that you want the power to do.

On dealing with complaints, the conversation in the first session got a little confused for me, because we were talking slightly about complaints via a platform and how they might operate, but also about complaints coming into local authorities. David, how do you deal with complaints about drivers generally, not necessarily people working outside Wolverhampton? I guess a basic type of complaint might be from the police, saying that a driver has gone through a red light or broken a speed limit. How would you deal with that?

David Pattison: We have a very detailed complaints policy—I am happy to send you a copy—which we will go through and will always make sure we follow. We have a dedicated complaints line, and we have investigators appointed to do that. It is set out in our policy what the expectation is and how that will work. The key here is transparency, to give that assurance to the trade but also, critically, assurance to our public and residents that we will do the right thing.

Q55 **Dr Arthur:** We heard earlier about drivers being automatically suspended and stuff. Would that not happen for red lights or speeding for you?

David Pattison: The challenge is initially about suspension: you cannot suspend pending an investigation. The law is really clear that you are not allowed to suspend just because you have an ongoing police investigation, and the law needs to change in that respect. There was a case back in 2012 that clarified that. Where we have really serious concerns and investigate, we will often ask for what is called a voluntary surrender, but one thing that could be a really useful recommendation—



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Q56 **Dr Arthur:** How would voluntary surrender work if there is a serious accusation of, say, a sexual offence?

David Pattison: We would ask them to voluntarily surrender their licence and have a discussion with the operator—the operators are a really important part of this—and then it would go through a review process. We would make a decision on that within one day, and that is set in our policy. If you could give a power to the police so that when the custody sergeant is deciding what to do in relation to an offence, they could decide whether the driver should be suspended from their licence, and that could be factored in by the magistrates when they make decisions about custody and suspension of the licence, that would also really help. There are additional powers that would be really helpful in the sector.

Q57 **Dr Arthur:** That recommendation for the police is interesting. I am guessing that if a driver is convicted for a red light or speeding offence, you would get a notification from the police, and normally the police would recommend a suspension. I am just guessing. Would you always follow the police recommendation?

David Pattison: The police will not necessarily recommend, but we have exactly what it says in our policy: in a situation where they have more than four points, we will recommend revocation of their licence.

Q58 **Dr Arthur:** Would you always follow the police recommendation?

David Pattison: The police will not generally make a recommendation, but we have it really clearly in our own policy.

Q59 **Dr Arthur:** Did you want to add to that, Helen?

Helen Chapman: With regard to complaints, if we get notification from the police, or indeed from a private hire operator, that a driver has been accused of an offence, particularly a serious sexual offence, we will look to take action that same day, as soon as we become aware of the incident. Obviously, it will depend on the individual circumstances of the case, but if we are talking about a serious allegation, that action would normally be immediate revocation of the licence.

Q60 **Dr Arthur:** So you can revoke, whereas David cannot.

Helen Chapman: We can revoke. I think David can revoke as well.

David Pattison: Absolutely.

Dr Arthur: Okay, sorry.

Helen Chapman: There is the power to revoke, and then there is the power to immediately revoke. If you revoke, the driver can continue to work subject to the outcome of an appeals process, but an immediate revocation means they cannot work from that point going forwards. I think David was talking about suspensions. The power to suspend is actually quite difficult, because there was a case in 2012—I cannot recall



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the exact details—that essentially said that a suspension is almost a final decision.

The way we used to use suspension powers was that you would suspend, or immediately suspend, somebody's licence on receipt of the complaint or allegation, and then you would wait for the police to investigate. You may then take a further step to revoke or immediately revoke the licence at the outcome of the police investigation. Through all that time, you would have passenger safety right at the heart of your decision making and you would make sure that the individual could not continue to work. Because of the case in 2012, we are no longer able to use those suspension powers in that way at all, so they have essentially become null and void. There is the odd occasion when we can use them, but most of the time it is not appropriate.

Coming back to the complaints process, it is not straightforward—some of this comes back to cross-border hiring, which we have already talked about—for a passenger to identify who they should be making the complaint to. Quite often they do not know who the licensing authority is. Some passengers do not understand that there is a licensing authority and a regulator, especially in private hire. We are in the process of rolling out complaint stickers to go into all TfL-licensed vehicles.

Dr Arthur: Complaints or comments.

Helen Chapman: Complaints or comments, absolutely, because some people do want to make a positive comment about their journey. Hopefully that will make it clear for London-licensed vehicles, but it is a challenge.

Q61 **Dr Arthur:** David, this anomalous situation where the vast bulk of your drivers are outside Wolverhampton, that must be a huge challenge for you in terms of dealing with complaints. Where the platform—the app—is aware that the driver might have been doing something that contravenes his licence, do you feel they are good at reporting that back to you?

David Pattison: Some of our operators are certainly really good on that; that exchange of knowledge and information with many of our operators is really good, and we then use those operators to try tackle that. What everyone wants is to have a really compliant trade that has confidence from the public. We have those stickers as well; they go in all our vehicles. They say, "Have your say," and they can be scanned, with a QR code and a number. They do not talk about complaints, but it is really clear that that is how to contact us and raise something with us as a council. But your point is a really good one: the operators are a really important part of this. One of the benefits in some large organisations like Uber is that they have really good data and can really pinpoint what the issues are, so that has been quite helpful.

On the point that Helen was making, we can revoke and we do that regularly.



Dr Arthur: I should have used better terminology.

David Pattison: But we think it would be really helpful to have a power of interim suspension as well. If the police arrest someone on day one and tell us on day one, we do not have the power. Normally, you would almost have to wait for that process to come through, or make a revocation decision when you do not necessarily have the information before you, which is clearly not acceptable. In certain strong situations there should be a power to suspend.

Q62 **Dr Arthur:** I guess the other kind of complaint you are getting would be from people who feel that the driver has not treated them courteously, or perhaps third parties who are walking down the street and see cars poorly parked or behaving erratically. Can you take evidence from third parties, such as people tweeting you pictures of bad driving and so on? Can you act on that, or is that not possible?

David Pattison: We certainly can.

Dr Arthur: Excellent. That is good.

Q63 **Laurence Turner:** Very quickly, because this question has been answered in part, how has the growth of ride-hailing apps changed the nature of private hire activity in your area? What challenges, beyond anything that you have already put on record, has that created for you as licensing authorities?

Helen Chapman: It has definitely changed the face of the industry. There have been challenges. We work under different legislation in London, so it is not the 1976 Act, but the 1998 Act. Ironically, although the taxi legislation for London is much older—it is Victorian—in some respects it is far more enabling when it comes to technology, whereas under the 1998 Act it has been really challenging to consider how to bring in the right regulations to cope with that new technology.

The way in which the app companies have revolutionised the way that passengers interact, on both the taxi side and the private hire side, by and large has brought a lot of benefits to passengers, because they have far more certainty. We have introduced a large number of regulations with passenger safety at their heart. We have made sure that the passenger is provided with a booking confirmation with a photo of the driver or the driver's details. We touched on complaints earlier, and they all have set processes in place for complaints and so on.

Lee Petrak: Fundamentally, this is a huge change for the hackney carriage trade, certainly in Blackpool. The emergence of Uber and the ride-hailing apps model has almost rendered hackney carriages obsolete in certain circumstances. If you think about the practicalities, certainly in a town like Blackpool where a holidaymaker may want to get in a taxi or private hire vehicle from the popular promenade back to the hotel, their options would essentially be, "Do I walk to the nearest taxi rank—bearing in mind I might not know where that is—or do I get my phone out and



instantly get a vehicle as close as possible to my location?" Using an analogy, if you wake up in the morning and trying to obtain the local news, would you walk to the shop and get a paper or would you just look on the internet to find out what is going on in the world? That is a real danger and threat for the hackney carriage trade, so I do not think the two are on an equal footing at all, bearing in mind the current framework.

Q64 Laurence Turner: I am glad you used the term "equal footing", because this is a question for you all. Do you think local authorities should have equivalent powers to cap the number of private hire vehicles as exist for hackney carriages?

Lee Petrak: Yes, I do. Simply, yes.

David Pattison: For me there is no easy answer. The challenge for us is that we have over 50,000 drivers and most of them are not licensed in Wolverhampton. I do not want to have a situation where we have a cap and then those from Wolverhampton or close by who want work within Wolverhampton miss out. My personal view is that uniform fees, uniform standards and stronger enforceability across the country would probably be a more sensible suggestion.

Helen Chapman: We do not have the power to cap taxis or private hire in London. The answer is very nuanced. Without addressing cross-border hiring, capping is only going to cause more problems for licensing authorities. I do not agree that uniform standards and uniform fees will resolve the problem either. You could see that if cross-border hiring were to be properly resolved then there would definitely be some advantages to some form of primary legislation to introduce a cap, but there would also be disadvantages.

The advantages of a cap are obviously reducing congestion and making sure jobs are done locally, and there are environmental benefits, but, thinking about passenger safety and convenience, the reduced availability might mean that somebody stood on the side of the road at 2 am cannot get a vehicle. It is very resource intensive for licensing authorities. If you look at New York, which has had a medallion system in place for taxis, you would have to do regular supply and demand surveys. How do you reach people and really understand what their demand might be in 12 months' time from a taxi or private hire vehicle? It would need a lot more consideration.

Q65 Steff Aquarone: If there was a way of doing this with data—Helen, I noticed you have been asking for statutory powers to require operators to supply quite detailed passenger and operator data—what impact would that have on your ability to uphold the regulations and standards, and on passenger safety? Do the rest of the panel share the view that that would be a good thing?

Helen Chapman: Again looking at New York, it requires an awful lot of data from operators because it has the legislative power to ask for that.



Having a much clearer understanding of passenger journeys—where they start, where they end—would bring a lot of benefit to licensing authorities, both coming back to the capping point and on the cross-border hiring point. We believe that requiring operators to share that data with us would help us to understand what the future of regulation should look like and how we can be protecting passengers and taking it to the next level.

Q66 **Steff Aquarone:** Do the others agree with that?

David Pattison: Absolutely; that sharing of data from operators is key. The question was asked earlier about the rise of the apps. We get much better data than we ever used to from those apps, and that has been really helpful in a number of matters. It gives much more confidence in relation to enforcement as well, and it has actually helped in a number of cases. The challenge for licensing authorities is that that depends on the quality of your current licence condition—how well drafted it is, whether they are required to share that data with you, and what data and when. National standards on that, and the ability to ask for that information in order to check whether someone was following the rules correctly, would be really helpful. It is a good suggestion.

Lee Petrak: It depends on whether the principles of cross-border hiring remain. If they do, then having access to data that gives us an indication of where vehicles are operating would be hugely beneficial, especially from an operational point of view when many of the issues that I have heard about that, certainly at present in Blackpool, relate to enforcement type issues. Also, understanding and knowing what vehicles are where is an essential part of knowing and understanding what your operational capacity needs to be in order to enforce effectively. At the moment we have to be honest and say that we cannot enforce effectively.

Q67 **Alex Mayer:** The Casey audit linked weaknesses in taxi and private hire vehicle licensing to serious passenger safeguarding failures. How confident are you that the current licensing framework enables licensing authorities to adequately protect passengers?

Helen Chapman: We have talked a lot about passenger safety, but that has to be at the heart of what we do, and we must think about convenience as well. We have heard from the driver unions this morning; of course, there are also drivers, and driver safety is important. I feel that any legislative framework has to have passengers and their safety at its heart. Do we have that right at the moment? Everything we have heard this morning would suggest that it is not right and is not at the right level. There are too many variants and inconsistencies, and there are little bits that are left to chance. We have seen in Rotherham and other authorities, certainly within London, some serious sexual offences that take place from time to time, so there is more that can be done.

Q68 **Alex Mayer:** Do you have any suggestions of specific additional measures that could be put in place to improve safety?



Helen Chapman: In London we have introduced what we call a safety, equality and regulatory understanding assessment for all taxi and private hire drivers, and we are consulting on pedicabs at the moment and proposing a similar regime to bring pedicabs into licensing. This is where we set out what is expected of a driver from a safety perspective, and our regulations are underpinning that. Then we assess them to make sure that they understand and follow it and know what is acceptable and what is not. I am absolutely sure there will be more that we can do around it, but we can follow up.

David Pattison: In Wolverhampton, as I said, we have a decision within one working day on a safeguarding complaint. We have a safeguarding officer, and safeguarding training and testing is part of what all drivers have to apply for. There has been some progress made in the last couple of years by the Government as well. You will all have read in the submissions that we now have a national database on revocations, refusals and suspensions, the NR3S.

Alex Mayer: That is our next question.

David Pattison: That is a really good start, although there is still some way for it to go. I will not pre-empt that question.

The other thing that would be really good is, as part of uniform standards, for every driver to be required to sign up to the daily check on the DBS, so that that is checked on a daily basis. That is something we have been able to do as a council, but I would really like that to be done across the board, as that would make a difference too.

Lee Petrak: I agree that the current system does not go far enough. It certainly does not mandate the type of training that should be delivered or the key issues. We are even at a point where we still get the odd question in Blackpool about whether drivers in other areas have to be DBS checked. It is just crazy, isn't it, that somebody is still asking that question in 2025. Statutory guidelines make references to types of training that should—but not must—be undertaken. Without pre-empting your next question, at the moment it does not go far enough, and we would certainly welcome that being mandated.

Q69 **Alex Mayer:** How effective do you think the national register of taxi and private hire licence refusals, revocations and suspensions has been so far in practice, and how do you think it could be improved to better improve passenger safety?

David Pattison: When I first started out in taxi licensing, a long time ago, we always wanted to be able to see a revocation, suspension or refusal in another authority. Previously, you almost had to rely on the honesty of the particular driver to say where they had applied. There was no way of checking. Actually having that is a really good start.



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It is only as good as the data on there, so the speed with which people put the data on there should be mandated, to make sure that we can rely on it. It should also be backdated a bit further than it currently is. We have put on all our data from back in 2012, and it would be really useful for everybody to have their data going back some time.

Currently, decisions have to remain on there for 11 years, which is not long enough; it should be there for 99 years so that we can see why. I would also like to have not just revocations, refusals and suspensions, but all licences on there, so that we almost have a national database. Then, if you are a police custody sergeant who has someone that been arrested for a very serious sexual offence, you can check a national database there and then and say, "One of our recommendations for bail conditions is that they do not carry out licensable activity." That would give a lot more confidence to the public as well, so that is something we would like to see happen.

Helen Chapman: I agree that it is a good start. It is effective in preventing licensing shopping where drivers have been refused, suspended or revoked by another authority. It could go further. We are checking it 1,000 to 1,500 times a week depending on our application volumes at the time, and the system serves its core purpose well but beyond that its value is quite limited. We would definitely be keen to explore additional data on it. With private hire operator licensing decisions, for example, we have nearly 1,800 private hire operators in London, and of course everybody talks about the very large ones, but they are very intensive and a significant amount of work goes into making a decision on some of those bigger operators. Being able to check and perhaps discuss with other licensing authorities would be helpful. There is an opportunity to improve the process through automation; an integrated API would certainly make it a little less manually intensive.

If possible, after my colleague has spoken, I would quite like to come back on the safety point.

Chair: We are hoping to get to PMQs, so could you send it in writing, please?

Helen Chapman: I understand. Absolutely.

Lee Petrak: I agree with both Helen and David. We have experienced some practical benefits from the use of the NR3 system over the last few months. I would like to see a national database, as David mentioned. How far that went and how it was used and audited would be critical.

To give a practical example of the benefits of a national database, this month I presided over a case in which we were made aware of an allegation of illegal ranking in the town. We did not witness it; another driver sent it into us with a video. We made initial inquiries to find out who the driver was, but the driver was not known to us. We made a determination to write and warn and send a copy to their home licensing



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authority for them to do whatever they wanted to within the control of their licensing regime. Essentially, we made a determination on the offending part and passed it over to the licensing authority to preside over anything under the licensing regime part. We do not know what happens to that.

The other aspect of that is that we do not know whether that driver might have done the same thing in lots of different areas. A national database might have given me that information and led me to make a different decision, whereby I might have prosecuted him instead.

Chair: One of many supporting reasons for a national database.

Q70 **Alex Mayer:** The whole Government seems to be moving in the direction of devolution and more regional mayoral authorities. However, if you look through the evidence we have received, most of the councils that currently hold licensing powers do not seem that keen on it. Maybe that is unsurprising. Do you think that moving taxi and PHV licensing to regional strategic transport authorities might help improve consistency and enforcement?

Lee Petrak: The short answer is yes.

Alex Mayer: Good. Fantastic.

Lee Petrak: Localism is virtually dead in this industry, but regionalism might still be a possible solution.

Q71 **Alex Mayer:** Wolverhampton had greatness thrust upon it; is it happy to lose it all again?

David Pattison: We have seen the benefits from having a larger size, because you can invest in additional technology and do more enforcement. There is definitely merit in a more regional approach, certainly on enforcement, and that level of consistency.

Q72 **Alex Mayer:** Perhaps London is a model we could all follow.

Helen Chapman: We are effectively a regional licensing authority, yes, and I would not recommend that that is broken up and pushed out to local authorities. So yes, we advocate it.

Q73 **Chair:** As Helen knows, we get lots of complaints through our casework from drivers who are our constituents about what they say are unreasonable delays in the turnaround of applications and renewals. Is that an issue in different authorities, or is it all because you are seeking additional information that takes time to find?

Helen Chapman: In London there have been some challenges this year. We had a cyber incident last year, when we had to take our systems down to protect customer data. Shortly after that we went live with the new licensing software system and there have been some challenges. We invested significant time, effort and resources into recovering, but there



are definitely occasions when we are writing to drivers to request additional information and that takes time.

Q74 **Chair:** Or from other authorities—health or whatever?

Helen Chapman: Yes.

Q75 **Chair:** David and then Lee, the same question to you.

David Pattison: We are often waiting for information. As I say, the key is making sure that we are satisfied that they are fit and proper. Particularly where people have spent a significant amount of time abroad, a certificate of good conduct can often take a long time to get from a different country, and that is a challenge. We have recruited an extra 40 staff this year. That has definitely been a real challenge, but we have to make sure that we are sure that they are fit and proper.

Lee Petrak: It can happen. For us, licensing is certainly about peaks and troughs, and when you factor resourcing into that, such as having staff off and whatnot, it can create problems for you. But on the whole, I would say in limited cases. Longer delays tend to be as a result of us waiting on information, particularly DBSs, because they can be delayed for weeks on end. If that application is with us—our model is that we take the application and then the DBS process is started—then that delay looks like it is ours when in fact it is not.

Chair: Thank you very much for your evidence today—thank you to all today's witnesses. We have found it a very helpful and interesting session. We will be holding a second evidence session in this inquiry in a few weeks' time; the date is yet to be confirmed. That concludes today's meeting.