

Written evidence submitted by Dr Tom Vickers, Senior Lecturer in Sociology, Nottingham Trent University

1. Executive Summary

- 1.1. This submission focuses on the employment and working conditions private hire and taxi drivers face across the UK. It builds on an in-depth study of one UK Local Authority where the research team interviewed stakeholders from across the system.
- 1.2. The teams research highlighted the precarious position many workers faced pre-pandemic and the structural challenges that should be addressed.
- 1.3. This submission builds on this research and combines it with an understanding of the current position of drivers considering the pandemic. Within this piece we recommend that driver welfare and pay and conditions are included in the reframing of regulatory framework. A Covid-19 specific financial support system is developed to help self-employed drivers recoup the cost of creating Covid-19 secure vehicles. A study on the compulsory use of mask within private hire and taxis is undertaken to support driver and passenger safety and finally financial support should be provided for self-employed workers who are required to self-isolate following exposure to the Covid-19 virus.

2. Summary

- 2.1. This submission builds on research and partnerships developed by Dr Tom Vickers and colleagues at Nottingham Trent University and supported by Nottingham Civic Exchange.
- 2.2. Figures from the UK Office for National Statistics suggest that rates of death from Covid-related causes have been [around three times higher](#) for private hire and taxi drivers compared to the general adult population. This has significant implications for drivers, passenger safety, and the sustainability of local transport services.
- 2.3. Since 2018, members of the [Work Futures Research Group](#) at Nottingham Trent University have been researching [working conditions for private hire and Hackney taxi drivers](#) in England. We identified economic insecurity and precarious conditions among drivers, becoming worse over recent years, as illustrated by the following quotations from stakeholders:

2.4.

"I've been in the cab trade since 1990 and I was making more in say 1995 than I am now. My take home pay has decreased although the fares have gone up. Just because it's - the market basically is flooded." (DWPE07, Hackney drivers' organisation)

"You could do one job in an hour; the minimum fare on Uber is £3, for you as a rider. Now the slice that Uber take is 25%; it's a big chunk, and so you're left with £2.25, and that's an hour's worth of work, minus your fuel, minus your running costs, insurance, road tax, etc.... Now, on a busy weekend you will probably make more than £10 an hour, before you take out your expenses, but you're still going to be hovering around that threshold. If you take it over a week, you find that you're actually falling below the minimum wage threshold." (DWPE04, private hire drivers' organisation)

e found evidence that many key stakeholders do not accept responsibility for the health and wellbeing of drivers, including central government, local government and private hire operators. This is influenced by the legal definition of drivers as self-employed contractors, a designation which denies drivers many of the rights that are afforded other workers and employees, including sick pay:

"a licensing authority, that's what we are; we license particular activities which taxis in all its forms is. We're not an employer. Sometimes drivers don't understand that, and they think that we should be working to help improve their conditions. But, in reality, they are self-employed ... we can't directly influence working conditions." (DWPE06, individual from City Council)

"being self-employed is not basically getting any holiday pay, sick pay or stress leave. And then how he's going to afford his monthly payments. Yeah, because most of them are the only breadwinners for their own family, putting the food, bread and butter and paying bills." (DWPE01, hackney drivers organisation)

"if you look at the definition of self-employed, you control everything. You control pricing, you control invoicing, you control your customers, you control every aspect of the journey, and every aspect of that process, that's the true meaning of self-employed.... The only control that we have is where we park up to pick them up from, and even the journey [route] is not up to us." (DWPE04, private hire drivers' organisation)

This designation has recently been subject to legal challenge, with a final ruling expected from the Supreme Court at any time.

- 2.5. As self-employed contractors, financial support from the state only became available to drivers from June, and there have been [suggestions](#) that many would not have qualified under the government's limited conditions. This created pressure to continue working, even if drivers had characteristics that meant they should have been shielding at home, increased drivers' risk of exposure to Covid-19 while at work and made it more difficult to self-isolate.
- 2.6. A second significant factor underpinning the vulnerability of drivers is the UK's regulatory framework, which rightly gives a high priority to the [safety and wellbeing of passengers](#) but makes no provisions for the [protection of drivers](#). Our interviews with key individuals

in one UK local authority highlighted that making safe working conditions a requirement as part of private hire operators' licence would require changes to national legislation and

"it's a conversation I have with private hire drivers quite a lot ... I absolutely understand their problems around the gig economy and stuff. But I'm the licensing authority.... I can't dictate terms and conditions to operators.... The primary thing is [that] they operate a safe business: they operate a business that doesn't put their passengers and the public at risk. And that's what the law tells me I have to do.... Imposing and policing large operators, because that's what it'll mean, about their terms and conditions, is a bit beyond our scope ... we might be able to do it, if we increase our licensing fees to cover that sort of cost, but I would rather go around a route of trying to negotiate change with them." (DWPE03, Individual from City

additional resources for monitoring and enforcement:

- 2.7. Our research found that the only consistent advocates for drivers' safety have been drivers' own organisations, which take various forms including [trade unions](#), [associations](#) and [cooperatives](#).
- 2.8. The nature of drivers' working environment, in a confined space with a succession of different people, creates further risks of transmission. No requirement or funding for protective measures has been established so far by government. While masks [were made mandatory](#) for passengers on public transport in England from 15 June, the same requirement was only introduced for private hire and Hackney passengers from 24 September.
- 2.9. The full research report and a series of recommendation focused policy briefing papers can be found here: <https://bit.ly/WF-DWPE>.

3. **About the authors**

- 3.1. Dr Tom Vickers is a Senior Lecturer in Sociology and convenor of the [Work Futures Research Group](#). He has led research projects concerning working lives and human mobility, receiving funding from the Economic and Social Research Council, British Academy and Leverhulme Trust. He has published research on mobility, work and employment in a range of internationally recognised academic journals.
- 3.2. Since 2018 Dr Vickers has led research into working conditions for private hire and hackney drivers. This involved an international review of literature and an empirical case study focusing on an English city in the East Midlands, which included interviews with a range of local stakeholders. This led to a written submission to the Department for Transport consultation on protecting passengers in April 2019. The project was supported by an interdisciplinary team that combined expertise on labour and mobility (Dr Tom Vickers), Human Resource Management and critical management perspectives (Professor Daniel King), reducing harm in the night-time economy (Dr Laura Garius), and precarious work in Nottingham (Sharon Hutchings). The literature research was conducted by David Dahill and Dr Dominic Holland.

- 3.3. [Nottingham Civic Exchange](#) is Nottingham Trent University's pioneering civic think tank. It supports the role of NTU as an anchor institution in the city and the region. Nottingham Trent University holds engagement with communities, public institutions, civic life, business and residents at the core of its mission.

4. **Recommendations**

- 4.1. The UK's regulatory framework for the sector should be expanded to include attention to drivers' health and safety alongside that of passengers.
- 4.2. An evidence review should be conducted concerning the most effective measures for preventing transmission in private hire vehicles and taxis, and this should be used to inform standardised requirements for operators, drivers and passengers across England.
- 4.3. Grants should be made available to drivers to purchase necessary PPE and/or make modifications to their vehicles to comply with the above proposed national standards.
- 4.4. Financial support should be made available to drivers during any periods of self-isolation or shielding required by national regulations.
- 4.5. An urgent review should be conducted into the implementation of the support scheme for self-employed individuals, which opened in June 2020, to assess the extent to which this proved effective for drivers, and the findings should inform future support.
- 4.6. Tailored training and advice should be provided to drivers who may want to move out of the sector to seek alternative work.

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