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MORE TAXIS NEEDED AT PEAK TIMES

With 10,000 business customers across the capital, ranging in size from multi-national companies such as BT and Thames Water to sole traders, the LCCI policies are always informed by the experiences of their member companies. LCCI Chief Executive, Colin Stanbridge, said: "While the London Taxi remains at the heart of the capital's infrastructure, its iconic status is coming under threat. London taxi drivers are an ageing population and our report reveals a worrying trend towards older drivers working fewer hours – particularly during the evenings – and reaching a peak at one of the capital's busiest times – Saturday night." At the moment, there are more drivers aged over 70 in the taxi trade than there are under 30. Of course it is younger drivers who are out there working all hours as they have bigger outgoings than some of the older drivers.

According to the report, drivers under 30 work, on average, twice as many hours per week as those aged 70 and over. These differences are even more pronounced with regard to working at night. Drivers under 50 are twice as likely to work until 9pm, at least once a week, and ten times more likely to work until midnight, compared to drivers over 50.

TAXI SERVICE IS THE BEST IN THE WORLD

London's taxi trade has a reputation for being the best in the world, but if this report is correct in its calculations, the private hire trade are already benefiting from passengers looking to get home in the evening. Three out of five private hire operators in central London say a lack of black cabs on the streets at night boosts their businesses, while some 28 per cent said they had increased their own driver numbers at night. The report continues by saying: "To compound this problem, the distribution of when drivers choose to work at night not only varies across the week but these variations are inversely proportional to when Londoners need black cabs, such as after visiting late-night pubs and clubs." In fact, the LCCI estimates that there are four times as many taxis on the streets at 9pm on a Friday night than at the same time on Saturday night, when night-time visitor activity peaks.

Brian Rice, Chairman of Dial-a-Cab, has written to David Williams about the article. Brian told Mr Williams: "I write in response to your article concerning the alleged shortage of taxis at night in London. There is no question that London has the best qualified and most professional taxi drivers in the world, the standard should be maintained at all costs, they are without

doubt, as you state the 'Gold Standard'. However, there is little doubt that during the night there is a shortage of taxis in certain parts of London due to the fact that we are not attracting young drivers into our profession, that are prepared to work these unsociable hours when they could be more at risk. Unfortunately, the statistics that were quoted were not correct, between April 06 and March 07, 545 new All London Licences were issued, however, 560 were returned making a net loss of 15, the licensed taxi fleet in London is actually shrinking. The Private Hire industry with their lower standards are already twice the size of the taxi industry, unless ways are sought to attract young blood into our industry who are prepared to study for a reasonable amount of time in order to attain the 'Gold Standard' then the licensed taxi industry in London, the best in the world, will become a tourist attraction similar to the Gondolas in Venice!"

ILLEGAL TOUTS

One of the knock on effects of the shortage of cabs can be seen in the number of illegal touts on the streets. Although the police activity to stop these touts does not seem to have a huge impact, illegal touting is a problem which puts extra strains on budgets and also threatens the safety of the travelling public. Bob Oddy, General Secretary of the Licensed Taxi Drivers Association, is quoted in the article written by David Williams as saying he believed the report had been driven by Chamber members who had a "vested business interest". London's business leaders have given overwhelming backing for improved taxi services, with 93 per cent of those surveyed rating

a good taxi network as crucial for the capital's economy. According to the research just seven per cent of top company directors use taxis to get to and from work, but 40 per cent say they use taxis for travelling between meetings during the day. Almost a third of directors described black cab availability between 5 and 7pm as poor, or very poor; 59 per cent of directors also described the availability of taxis after midnight as either 'poor' or 'very poor.'

The LCCI report contains some recommendations as to how the situation might be improved. It also recommends some possible changes to the Knowledge. The recommendations can be read below. Mr Stanbridge said: "London residents, tourists and the business community alike, all rely on the currently unrivalled service which only the London Taxi can provide. Yet with an ever burgeoning population and in the run-up to 2012, if the London Taxi is to retain its position as the capital's most flexible form of transport, the industry must confront its problems and secure a successful future for all." Taxi Globe asked Geoffrey Riesel, Chairman of Radio Taxis Group and a Board member of the LCCI for his view. He said: "We support the independent research conducted by the London Chamber of Commerce, which clearly demonstrates that the London Taxi industry is now at risk. First because the numbers of drivers (especially young ones) are dwindling. And the older drivers quite naturally are working less. If the taxi industry doesn't do the work in the end someone else will. Those who resist improvement in the testing methodology (we all want to keep the high standards) risk the kind of response that is beginning to surface and which the Evening Standard Opinion column concluded "to further grow Private Hire instead".

"I am sure that the figures given by the LTDA to the Standard (which exaggerated new entrants to the industry by a factor of almost five and which did not mention the retirees and leavers) were given by the LTDA in error or they must have been mis-reported.

"We must save the knowledge and the trade by modernising our methods and yet still keeping our gold standard."

MODERNISING THE KNOWLEDGE

While the standard required to complete the Knowledge should not be lowered or diluted, changes ought to be made to the method of assessment and appointment - which currently create an unreasonably high barrier to entry - to enable applicants to progress at their own pace. If successful, the fast track pilot (of 100 drivers) in operation at the time of writing this report could be rolled out to help improve the system. This should serve to make qualifying as a taxi driver more attractive, reduce the currently high drop-out rate and boost the number of younger drivers entering the industry.

INVESTMENT TO ATTRACT NEW ENTRANTS INTO THE INDUSTRY

New drivers need to be attracted into the industry and should be encouraged by the regulators and trade bodies, in conjunction with the sector skills council GoSkills, through activities such as workshops and roadshows.

FINANCIAL INCENTIVES FOR CANDIDATES UNDERGOING KNOWLEDGE

In the past subsidies have been provided for candidates undergoing training. Such incentives could be reinstated.

ACCREDITING THE KNOWLEDGE

The Public Carriage Office should urgently consider accrediting the Knowledge by an appropriate qualifications and skills body. The examinations should not be delivered by the regulator themselves rather outsourced to an independent provider. As a regulatory body, the PCO ought to be maintaining a strict regulatory control in standard setting, but should not need to be responsible for the testing process as this could be seen as a conflict of interest. This would reflect a more modern and up-to-date approach to providing the Knowledge of London qualification. There are numerous academic and commercial bodies with the appropriate expertise.

AN ANNUAL TAXI AUDIT REPORT

To be produced by the PCO. In addition to the current range of statistics produced by the PCO on the Knowledge, licensed driver numbers and their ages, the report would incorporate data on how often existing drivers work and a would comprise serious examination of both the demand for, and supply of, taxis. The Taxi Audit report would be undertaken by a credible independent organisation and should be included for consideration as part of the PCO's annual review of fares.

TAXI SHARING

Serious consideration should be given to incentives or controls to increase the number of drivers sharing a taxi. If a large percentage of taxis had two drivers, cabs would almost certainly be employed on a night shift as well as during the day. This can only be achieved either by significant fiscal incentives or by managing the ratio of taxi driver licences issued to the number of taxi cab licences.

An increase in the number of marshalled taxi ranks in Central London at weekends, supported by greater publicity. Details of where the ranks are located should be included on the night bus network maps that can be found at every bus stop. This would support the work already undertaken by TfL and the Mayor of London under the Safer Travel at Night initiative.

LTI STATEMENT IN RESPONSE TO LCCI REPORT

LTI welcomes the recent LCCI report and survey on the London Taxi trade. We have always supported the London taxi trade and want to safeguard the Gold Standard quality of service that the drivers provide. This standard of service is in part a result of the "Knowledge" which gives a driver the ability to navigate across and around London and LTI do not want to see this service diluted in any way whatsoever. However we do understand that the method of testing for the Knowledge can be improved.

LTI are pleased to join in the debate that has been provoked by the LCCI report, but do not want to see any detrimental action that might threaten the quality of service of the London Taxi trade or the ability for a driver to run a profitable business. Choosing to become a London Taxi driver must remain a career that is fulfilling for the driver whilst still delivering the highest level of service for the customer possible. LTI want to work with the trade to continually improve that service.

