

2015.10.05

3.5 Deputy C.F. Labey of Grouville of the Minister for Transport and Technical Services regarding taxpayers funding for the provision of the public service delivered by the taxi-cab industry:

In accordance with Standing Order 106(2) and (3) I declare an interest in that my husband drives a taxi.

The Bailiff:

I am sorry, I did not hear that, Deputy.

The Deputy of Grouville:

I am sorry. In accordance with Standing Order 106(2) and (3) I declare an interest in that my husband drives a taxi.

[15:00]

How much did Jersey taxpayers pay towards the provision of the public service delivered by the taxicab industry and how much has the recent review of the taxi-cab service cost the taxpayer in U.K. consultancy fees, officer time and any other fees and expenses?

Deputy E.J. Noel of St. Lawrence (The Minister for Transport and Technical Services):

The review of taxi-cab regulations was a requirement of the States contained within the 2010 Sustainable Transport Policy, or S.T.P. Previous to my appointment, some £57,514 was spent on consultants to investigate, review and consult upon the regulatory options with the public, the industry and specialist interest groups. In finally delivering the States S.T.P. requirement, the department has spent a further £12,143 during my time as Minister. For Members' interest, maintenance of the taxi rank facilities is funded from general maintenance budgets and is relatively low. Routine administration of the taxicab regulations is funded by the various fees paid by the taxicab operators to D.V.S. (Driver and Vehicle Standards) and so is at a net no cost to the public. While not readily quantifiable, an estimated additional £65,000 worth of unproductive officer time per year is spent in dealing with internal industry quarrels and petty complaints about one another. This is equivalent to a Grade 13 officer salary for a year. What we have done is provide a regulatory framework which addresses the customer need as identified in the 2012 Green Paper and provides a sustainable basis for the industry to move forward.

3.5.1 The Deputy of Grouville:

So there is no direct subsidy to the taxi-cab service from the public purse, unlike the bus service which costs the taxpayer £2 million. Why then does the Minister believe he can dictate and impose extra burdens and costs to an industry of self-employed people? It is surely akin to telling all banks what fare structure they have and, by the way, they all have to paint their buildings blue.

Deputy E.J. Noel:

Just to pick up on the amount of subsidy that currently is paid for the bus service, it is not £2 million, it is £4 million per annum, which equates to a pound per journey. Currently, there are just over 4 million journeys carried out per year. With regard to why my department regulates the taxi service industry, that is something that the general public wants us to do. We carried out extensive consultation back in 2012. Three key areas were identified by the public. They

found the current 2-tier system confusing. There was a perception that all taxi-cabs were too expensive. However, we have benchmarked the rank taxi fares and they are in line with the U.K. The third thing that the public had a concern about was the availability at peak times from both the taxi ranks and from the private hire side of the industry. During my tenure in office, we have discovered a fourth area that needs addressing and that is accessibility for those with mobility impairment. That is why we have been tasked by this Assembly to regulate this industry and that is what we are doing. We are moving away from what, historically, has been a quantitative regulation basis, i.e. restricting the numbers who can operate within the industry, and gradually moving towards a qualitative basis, thereby providing the public services that our Islanders demand.

3.5.2 The Deputy of Grouville:

Was it not the case that the U.K. consultant that was employed to do this review knew very little about the industry and identified the issue was the private hire in that they were not offering, sometimes, in some cases, the door-to-door service? I still fail to see how the Minister's proposals are going to improve a service of getting a passenger, for example, from Grouville to St. Mary, including passengers who are in wheelchairs. With his proposals they will be required to wheel themselves to the nearest rank.

Deputy E.J. Noel:

There are a number of issues there as opposed to a number of questions. To go back to the Deputy's comment about the U.K. expert, that expert has not only provided advice to us in Jersey, he has provided advice to many local authorities, including London, in the U.K. You do not have to be a taxi driver to be able to understand the industry. With regards to making the industry more productive, which is what we are aiming to do, thereby creating greater capacity at peak times to allow individuals, for example, at 10.30 p.m. at night to get a cab from a residence in Grouville to a residence in St. Mary, we are providing that capacity by bringing the industry away from a 2-tier system that is a hybrid - because they interact and mesh against each other in a way that causes friction - to one where it will gradually migrate to a one-tier system whereby taxis will be available from ranks, taxis will be able to be hailed and taxis will be able to be called either via the phone or an app or some other device to wherever the passenger is that needs to be collected.

3.5.3 Deputy S.Y. Mézec:

Is the Minister aware that the Taxi Drivers Association has been holding emergency meetings because of their dismay at the proposals that the Minister has come forward with? Will he agree to meet with them to talk about what elements of his proposals he may be willing to reconsider so that we can avoid any industrial action, which is something that is currently being spoken of at the moment?

Deputy E.J. Noel:

I am afraid I have already beaten the Deputy to it. I have already invited the president or chair of the Taxi Drivers Association, together with other representatives, to meet me. In fact, this is a call out now to all taxi and private hire firms, drivers, *et cetera*. My door has been open for the last 9 months. It continues to be open. Come and see me.

3.5.4 Deputy M. Tadier:

Following on from the answer given by the Minister for Health and Social Services, my question to the Minister for Transport and Technical Services relates to the size and colour of the vehicles and his preference. Would he envisage, perhaps, big yellow taxis as his preferred option for Jersey?

Deputy E.J. Noel:

I hope the Deputy read the paperwork that was issued a week ago. He will note that, over time, we are looking to limit the range of colours to be used by the industry to that of metallic silver, metallic greys and black. That is to provide some branding and some quality images for the Island, so our visitors know that they are getting into a taxi and that our locals know that they are getting into a taxi. It is about branding it and improving the quality of the overall service.

3.5.5 Deputy J.M. Maçon of St. Saviour:

Looking at the review, can the Minister confirm if it did or did not happen that vehicle emissions were taken into review? I know that in the recent London review they have made it that every taxicab has to have a certain level of emissions, which is causing quite a ruckus. Was that included within this review and, if not, why not?

Deputy E.J. Noel:

No, it has not been included in this review. We put that back for a future date, mainly because we needed to make sure that there is still an adequate range of vehicles for drivers to purchase, because the majority of the drivers in this industry are owner-drivers. There are some company vehicles as well, so we are aware of the fact that we are dealing with some 400 individuals and their lives and their families' lives, so we must make the transition one that is affordable and sustainable. We have not imposed a system whereby we are looking at carbon emissions, for example, on the vehicles, but that is likely to come in due course as technology changes, as we use more hybrids or maybe all electric vehicles. That is something that will come in the future.

3.5.6 Deputy R. Labey:

As 50 per cent of cars are silver on the Island, how are the new taxis going to be distinctive? Is the idea that every taxi should be wheelchair enabled not somewhat excessive as the demand is not there?

Deputy E.J. Noel:

If I can deal with the first matter first, we are also going to be bringing forward a bonnet wrap for the vehicles to give some distinctive branding for that. We are also freeing-up the regulations whereby cab drivers can get sponsorship for their vehicles and generate some additional income for them in that respect. I am afraid I have forgotten the last part of my good colleague Deputy Labey's question.

Deputy R. Labey:

About enabling all cabs to be wheelchair enabled is excessive because the demand is not there.

Deputy E.J. Noel:

Thank you. This is something that has come up in our research since I became a Minister and, indeed, at the Members' briefing a week ago, the Deputy of St. Mary commented that one of his parishioners had mentioned to him that they tried to book a disabled taxi to take them to an appointment and the earliest they could get was just before Christmas. We have many examples over the last 9 months of feedback from the public that shows that the accessibility is not working. There are only around 10 per cent of the current taxi fleet, both private hire and rank taxis, that are wheelchair friendly. Let us remind Members that by the end of 2018, under Social Security, we will be bringing forward the final tranches of the Island's anti-discrimination legislation and what we are proposing is to ensure that all our Island taxis conform to the spirit of that legislation and, therefore, are 100 per cent accessible for all Islanders. Currently, those disabled people, who wish to have a taxi to pick them up from their

home and take them to an appointment, have to effectively get a private hire vehicle. Those fares are higher than rank fares currently. That is not right because by the mere fact of being disabled you are being penalised by having to book the most expensive part of the industry's offering and that is not right. It does not look like we will get drivers in sufficient quantities to volunteer to have disabled vehicles and, therefore, it is only fair that we have a blanket requirement across the piece, so no drivers are advantaged or disadvantaged.

3.5.7 The Deputy of Grouville:

Does the Minister realise that making it one system, as well as having C.I.C.R.A. (Channel Islands Competition and Regulatory Authorities) issues, is going to exacerbate the lack of cabs - because I think the Minister is getting confused between the 2 - offering door-to-door service in country Parishes as everyone will be waiting in town at peak times?

Deputy E.J. Noel:

Just simple economics tells you that if all of the vehicles currently, be they taxis or cabs, congregated on the ranks it would spread those existing businesses too thinly. By creating one industry we are providing greater flexibility and allowing for greater productivity to come out of the industry. What C.I.C.R.A. would like us to do was to deregulate completely. I had a long telephone conversation with the chairman over the weekend and his opinion was that we should not have any ... that taxi drivers should be treated the same way as hairdressers are, or any other shop retailers, or whatever, there should not be any barriers to entry. I believe that is not right, I believe that we should have some quality barriers to entry, we should have our drivers D.B.S. (Disclosure and Barring Service) checked, they should be in the appropriate vehicles and with the appropriate training for the people that they carry in those vehicles. They should also be our ambassadors for picking up people from the airport and from the harbours. So, I believe that we should have a quality regulation, but I do not support the other side of the coin where C.I.C.R.A. believe that we should just open up and take away all boundaries to the industry. I think that would kill off the industry and adversely - seriously adversely - affect those 400 individuals that are currently working within it.