
TAXIS IN THE TOWN CENTRE

Responsible Cabinet Member - Councillor Nick Wallis, Highways and Transport Portfolio

Responsible Director(s) - John Buxton, Director of Development and Environment

Purpose of Report

1. To propose changes to Town Centre traffic regulations to improve taxi access to and egress from the town centre, for the benefit of taxi users and taxi operators.

Information and Analysis

2. As part of the consultation with taxi operators on taxi ranks, reported separately on this agenda, the taxi operators have asked the Council to consider allowing taxis to drive through three additional areas:
 - (a) The Coniscliffe Road bus lane, to allow more direct access into the town centre from the south-west
 - (b) The Stonebridge/St Cuthberts Way bus lane, to allow faster egress from the town centre
 - (c) Northgate/Crown Street, (between the inner ring road and the junction with East Street) to allow faster access into the town centre from Woodland Road and North Road.
3. A plan of the Northgate/Crown Street area is **attached**.
4. Such a proposal could apply only to licensed hackney carriages, which are identifiable by their red colour and signs. It could not apply to private hire vehicles, which cannot be distinguished from other cars sufficiently easily for enforcement to be effective.

Issues

5. National Guidance recommends that taxis using bus priority areas can be acceptable providing:
 - (a) road safety is not jeopardised;
 - (b) effective and efficient operation of the bus-priority measure is not compromised;
 - (c) the legal definitions of the vehicle classes are clear; and
 - (d) the vehicles are sufficiently distinctive for unequivocal enforcement.
6. The last two could be satisfied in this case. The rest of this report examines the advantages of the proposals described in paragraph 2 and then looks at the potential difficulties for road safety and bus operation (criteria (a) and (b) from paragraph 5).

Advantages of the proposal

7. There would be significant benefits if taxi users could be brought to and picked up from Northgate, given the major shops are here and, eventually, Commercial Street shopping centre entrance. However, it is difficult to identify kerb space where taxis could safely stop without removing bus stops or the one loading bay. This would reduce the efficiency and effectiveness of the bus priority measure. A traffic regulation order could ban taxis stopping on Northgate, but this would negate benefits for taxi users and be difficult to enforce. The best compromise would be to prevent all vehicles except buses stopping at or around bus stops on Northgate/Crown Street but to allow taxis to stop in the loading bay on Crown Street. The loading bay is not available to use by service vehicles during most of the day and so could be used by taxis to drop off passengers during those times.
8. All three proposals set out in paragraph 2 have advantages for taxi operators in terms of saving time to access some parts of the town centre. Coniscliffe Road may provide a slightly more direct access to the Houndgate area if travelling from the west. Use of the Stonebridge bus lane will save some time queuing at the Stonebridge roundabout for taxis heading north up St Cuthbert's Way. Use of Northgate/Crown Street could save taxis from Woodland Road or North Road approximately 370 metre distance (or under a minute in time depending on traffic speeds) in reaching Priestgate.
9. It should be noted that taxis were not able to access Northgate/Crown Street from the Northgate roundabout before the Pedestrian Heart scheme was implemented, but could do so from Crown Street in some circumstances, although the new traffic arrangements have increased journey distances and times from some parts of the Borough.

Road Safety

10. A formal Road Safety Audit should be carried out on the proposed changes before a new Traffic Regulation Order is made.
11. Whilst it would be advantageous in terms of travel time and distance for taxis to use Northgate to access the Priestgate rank, in practice taxis could 'hover' for custom around Northgate/Crown Street, and pick up/set down around bus stops and the loading bay, potentially creating road safety issues and reducing efficiency of bus operation. Avoiding this could require police enforcement presence.
12. In certain parts of the Tees Valley Arriva have issued instructions that if a car is parked at a bus stop the bus driver must not double park and drive past. This instruction was issued following a fatal incident associated with boarding passengers whilst being double parked. If taxis do use bus stops to drop off and pick up then this instruction could be enforced and have serious implications for public transport.
13. On St Cuthbert's Way there may be road safety concerns about taxis leaving the bus lane.

Effective and Efficient Operation of the Bus Priority Measures

14. On Coniscliffe Road, allowing taxis in the bus lane is likely to lead to requests to relocate a taxi rank onto Coniscliffe Road from the location currently proposed.

15. The concerns set out above about taxis wishing to pick up and drop off on Northgate could be disadvantageous to the operation of buses there.
16. The final road layout for the Pedestrian Heart in Northgate, due to be implemented in early 2007, may be more able to prevent taxis using bus stops than the current layout.
17. A detailed audit of whether the proposals would affect buses would be carried out before any change was made to the permanent Traffic Regulation Order.

Alternatives

18. Consideration has been given to alternatives:-
 - (a) Taxis can access the rear door of Marks & Spencer;
 - (b) The possibility of a taxi rank temporarily in Commercial Street car park;
 - (c) Replacing blue badge parking on Quebec Street with taxis.

None are as beneficial to taxi users and each has other disadvantages.

Conclusions

19. A formal audit would be required to ensure road safety will not be jeopardised and the effective and efficient operation of the bus priority measure is not compromised. However, on balance there are advantages to taxi users in these proposals.
20. To proceed there would be a requirement to change the Traffic Regulation Orders. There would be a requirement and an expectation to consult the police, other affected road users (particularly bus operators), businesses whose servicing might be affected and the public.
21. The extent to which the concerns and risks set out in this report are borne out in practice depends on how the risks are managed and on how taxi drivers use the areas. There would be continuing liaison with taxi operators to discuss responsible use and review the operation of the scheme. This would include discussion of how the voluntary agreement with bus operators for buses to travel at less than 20 mph in the town centre might be applied to taxis (given that there is no representative body for the individual taxi owners).
22. An “experimental” Traffic Regulation Order could be made, with the intention of making this permanent, but objections would still need to be considered at the end of the temporary period, and any road safety concerns would have to be considered. This would enable all users of the roads and the Council to assess the effects in practice before making the final decision on a permanent Order.
23. It is therefore proposed that, subject to the findings of the audits and appropriate consultations:
 - (a) An experimental Traffic Regulation Order is made to allow:
 - (i) Hackney carriages to use the Coniscliffe Road bus lane;
 - (ii) Hackney carriages to use the Stonebridge/St Cuthbert’s Way bus lane;

- (iii) Hackney carriages to access Northgate from the Northgate/inner ring road roundabout;
 - (iv) A Clearway preventing vehicles other than buses stopping on Northgate/Crown Street (but effectively allowing taxis to drop off passengers in the loading bay on Crown Street near Northgate).
- (b) The experimental Order be made for a maximum of 18 months, with a view to it being made permanent during that period.
- (c) Objections are sought during the first six months from the making of the Order, and then considered by Cabinet, together with the results from monitoring the experimental period.

Outcome of Consultation

24. Informal soundings have been taken from bus operators and the police. Bus operators strongly oppose the proposals, particularly on Northgate, as being detrimental to efficient bus operations and potentially to passenger safety. The proposal could make relationships with bus operators more difficult generally. Whilst the Police will consider any proposal put before them it is almost certain that they would object as it is the view of the Chief Constable that bus lanes are for buses only. This principle has been applied to the force area.
25. Taxi operators have requested the proposals for the reason set out in the report.
26. Dialogue will continue with bus operators, the police and taxi operators about ways of managing the risks about which concerns have been expressed.

Legal Implications

27. This report has been considered by the Borough Solicitor for legal implications in accordance with the Council's approved procedures. There are no issues which the Borough Solicitor considers need to be brought to the specific attention of Members, other than those highlighted in the report.

Section 17 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998

28. The contents of this report have been considered in the context of the requirements placed on the Council by Section 17 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, namely, the duty on the Council to exercise its functions with due regard to the likely effect of the exercise of those functions on, and the need to do all that it reasonably can to prevent, crime and disorder in its area. It is not considered that the contents of this report have any such effect.

Council Policy Framework

29. The issues contained within this report do not represent change to Council policy or the Council's policy framework

Decision Deadline

30. For the purpose of the 'call-in' procedure this does not represent an urgent matter.

Recommendation

31. It is recommended that :-

- (a) Subject to the findings of the relevant audits, the Director of Development and Environment and the Borough Solicitor be authorised to make an experimental Traffic Regulation Order to allow:
 - (i) Hackney carriages to use the Coniscliffe Road bus lane;
 - (ii) Hackney carriages to use the Stonebridge/St Cuthbert's Way bus lane;
 - (iii) Hackney carriages to access Northgate from the Northgate/inner ring road roundabout;
 - (iv) A Clearway preventing vehicles other than buses stopping on Northgate/Crown Street.
- (b) The experimental Order be made for a maximum of 18 months, with a view to it being made permanent during that period.
- (c) Objections are sought during the first six months from the making of the Order, and then considered by Cabinet, together with the results from monitoring the experimental period.

Reasons

32. The recommendations are supported to improve taxi access to and from the town centre.

John Buxton
Director of Development and Environment

Background Papers

'Transport in the Urban Environment', The Institution of Highways of Transportation.

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