

Date: 29 May 2018

The Rt Hon. Chris Grayling MP
Department of Transport
Great Minster House
33 Horseferry Road
London
SW1P 4DR

Dear Mr. Grayling,

I am writing to you with regards to the licensing rules for taxi and private hire vehicles which currently I believe are not meeting the needs of either the industry or the public.

The 2015 deregulation act has allowed a 'race to the bottom' between licensing authorities which may be useful for cost cutting but is not providing the safe, high standards which people should expect from a method of transport where they are in close proximity to another person.

The latest available statistics from the Department, released last Autumn, showed some trends which point to cherry picking local authorities rather than drivers and companies registering with their local authority.

In the private hire industry we have an opportunity to act as eyes where others cannot and that is why there are two changes to current legislation which, whilst cannot stop such criminal behaviour from happening, can at least help to prevent it.

The first is the requirement for all authorities to make child sexual abuse awareness training mandatory, which currently only 58%, or 170 out of 293 licensing authorities do, according to the official statistics for England.

In both the media reports and official investigations, what has become apparent is the use of private hire vehicles to transport victims before and after they are abused. Of course, sometimes drivers are complicit or involved since no industry is entirely free of bad apples and that is why we have been calling for all authorities to require an enhanced disclosure and barring service check, which currently only 23%, or 67 out of 293 authorities, require.

To illustrate how this can work, I point you to the case from November of last year one minicab driver Satbir Arora saved a girl he was due to drop off at Gloucester station from a predatory paedophile. The girl, who was in her school uniform, had no one meet her at the station and the situation concerned Mr Arora who tried to ascertain whether the girl's parents knew where she was and calling the man she was due to be meeting, recording the calls.

The council which authorised his license, Cherwell District Council, provided safeguarding training in December 2016.

In contrast Telford Council have refused to respond to requests for information about their procedures and do not require an enhanced DBS check.

With the deregulation of the private hire industry, there has been an alarming trend in passenger safety. We have seen an influx of untrained drivers with insufficient background checks and coupled with this 'race to the bottom' by licensing authorities who are competing for the money from drivers and companies, this combines to create a situation where unscrupulous people could slip through the net.

In Wolverhampton there was an increase of 383% in the number of PHV licenses issued. Following the deregulation of the industry, drivers say that Wolverhampton City Council has been granting licenses to drivers who come from all over the country to exploit the easier tests. In England outside London, the total number of driver licenses increased by only 10.7% with the total number of drivers now registered in Wolverhampton standing at 3772, according to the council's figures.

The investigation last week by The Times also showed the high proportion of drivers per 1000 of population in Rossendale, Lancashire, which has 53.7 drivers; ten times as many as Christchurch, the second on the list.

Wolverhampton charges £225 a year for a PHV license, meaning its more relaxed rules can generate income for the council. Drivers are concerned that the council was handing out badges too easily and without stringent tests which used to be a hallmark for the industry.

The industry has always taken passenger safety very seriously and many licensing authorities now include mandatory training on child sexual exploitation or unaccompanied packages. You cannot assess if someone is competent at driving or their awareness of issues like CSE and terrorism from an online form.

The second change I believe should be implemented is the move to a model such as the 'Live Scan' system used in the United States, providing a fingerprint based background check. Because drivers are in a position of power when someone gets in their vehicle there should be that extra level of safety for passengers.

When it comes to safety, the government has a duty to ensure its requirements are fit for purpose. I believe there has been a shortfall in recent years but that the government will find support from not only those in the industry but organisations such as the LGA and personal safety organisations to make the best legislation and undo the damage of recent changes.

Yours sincerely,



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