

Taxi Operations In Canterbury City Centre - Short Topic Scrutiny Review

Introduction

The review panel was made up of the following Councillors:

Councillor Alex Perkins (Review Chairman) and Councillors Tony Austin, Ken Avery and Fred Whitemore.

The panel were supported by officers from relevant sections within the council.

The terms of reference for the review are contained within the project scope at Annex A.

This report deals only with issues related to Hackney drivers and vehicles and not private hire drivers and vehicles.

The concerns that the panel examined were; driver worries over the lack of rank space in the city, public concern over the apparent large number of taxis in certain areas at certain times, and whether the rank provision was located in the right place and available at the right time.

The panel were tasked with examining these concerns and suggesting improvements, whilst taking account of the plans for the development of the Cultural and Creative Quarter and of the nighttime economy. They were also asked to consider making recommendations that would reduce anti-social behaviour and improve public safety.

The Review

Following concerns over the operation of taxis in the city the council's Overview and Scrutiny Committee decided to carry out a short review on this topic. It wanted to take whatever steps it could to promote the use of taxis and their ease of movement and their availability in the City.

The Panel established some guiding principles and constraints for the review, namely;

- that taxis are a vital part of the public transport network,
- that wherever possible the review would aim to facilitate taxi drivers
- that day and night time issues needed different solutions
- that to improve public safety and reduce anti-social behaviour taxis should be waiting for people as they leave late night venues to reduce the flow of people through the city
- that the medieval lay out of the city centre makes it difficult to accommodate

rank space and creative solutions are necessary.

During the review, the panel met with officers from the Transport and Engineering service, the Tourism section and the Licensing team. The panel also met a selection of drivers individually at an evidence gathering session on 17th February, and held a meeting open to all taxi drivers in the district on 28th February (this meeting was attended by 21 drivers).

Taxi Rank provision

During their discussions the panel worked with drivers and officers to formulate six proposals for extending the provision of rank space. These suggestions were:

1. Formalising and creation of a nighttime rank on St George's Place/New Dover Road (outside of Chicago Rock Café).
2. The creation of a nighttime rank adjacent to The Guildhall and Westgate Towers.
3. The creation of a rank in Guildhall Street for evening use only, and opening up the High Street between C & H fabrics and Guildhall Street to taxis only with a 5mph speed limit.
4. The creation of a rank in Rose Lane to act as a drop off/pick up point at the rear of Marks and Spencer and Tesco.
5. Formalising the existing arrangements whereby Hackney Carriages can collect from St Margaret's Street and restricting access to Hawks Lane to traffic in the evening.
6. Altering the rank in Canterbury Lane into St Georges Street and its possible extension.

These suggestions were then put to the taxi drivers for their comments, which are summarised below.

Consideration was given to creating a small rank opposite The Guildhall in the lay by. The panel felt that this suggestion fitted the principle of providing space close to where people congregated, and that as the council owned the piece of land in question this could be a possibility. The amount of space in question would however only be enough for a two-car rank, and only after the buses had finished for the evening (last bus service 11.04pm). In proposing this rank the panel was also aware that the experiment to rank alongside the North Lane car park in the evening was creating problems around taxis queuing in the car park, and that the public were still gathering in St Dunstons Street unaware that the drivers were around the corner.

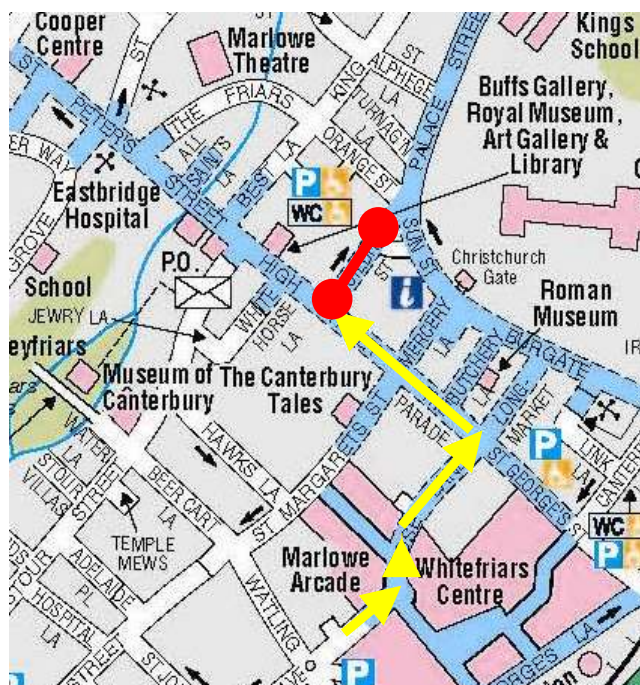
The panel applied the same principles that taxis should rank as close as possible to where the public needed them.

Driver Comments: The drivers felt that this suggestion would not be beneficial as it would only provide enough space for two cars, and could create conflict between drivers who were ranking in North Lane/St Dunstons Street, and the two drivers at the proposed lay by rank.

The drivers felt strongly, and this was supported by the panel, that a better solution would be to reinstate the rank in St Dunstons Street, and discontinue the failed experiment in North Lane. This would be on the proviso that Kirby's Lane would be converted to a one way street with the traffic flowing away from St Dunstan's Street thereby preventing drivers from ranking in Kirby's Lane which had been a previous concern when the rank was situated there before.

- Recommendation 2:** a) that the rank in St Dunstan's Street be reinstated.
b) Kirby's Lane be made one way with the traffic flowing away from St Dunstan's Street.
c) That the experimental rank in North Lane be discontinued.

Proposal 3: Creation of a rank in Guildhall Street for evening use only and opening up the High Street between C & H fabrics and Guildhall Street to taxis with a 5mph speed limit.



This part of the High Street is seen as problematic for many reasons including public safety. The Council has for a long time sought solutions to this problem. The panel felt that this proposal would meet many of the principles outlined above. By allowing taxi drivers to move slowly through the High Street they would improve safety in the area. Also the location of a rank in Guildhall Street will mean that there is provision in the centre of town, close to the Marlowe Theatre, restaurants and pubs. Restauranters are keen to have this rank for the benefit of their staff and customers.

Access through the top end of the High Street between C & H Fabrics and Guildhall Street could be allowed for taxis only, from 8pm until 8am. The panel felt this should be a six-month experiment to gauge the public's response.

Driver Comments: The drivers were broadly in favour of the proposal to open up this section of the High Street to slow moving taxi drivers and to provide a rank in Guildhall Street. There was a general agreement that a maximum speed of 5mph would need to be enforced. The drivers felt, that to be successful, the rank would need to be visible from the High Street, and that once people knew it was there the rank could be popular.

Recommendation 3: a) In the evening, to open up the High Street between BHS Service Area and Guildhall Street to taxis only with a 5mph speed limit.
b) To create a rank in Guildhall Street in the evening and

Proposal 4: The creation of a rank/pick up point in Rose Lane

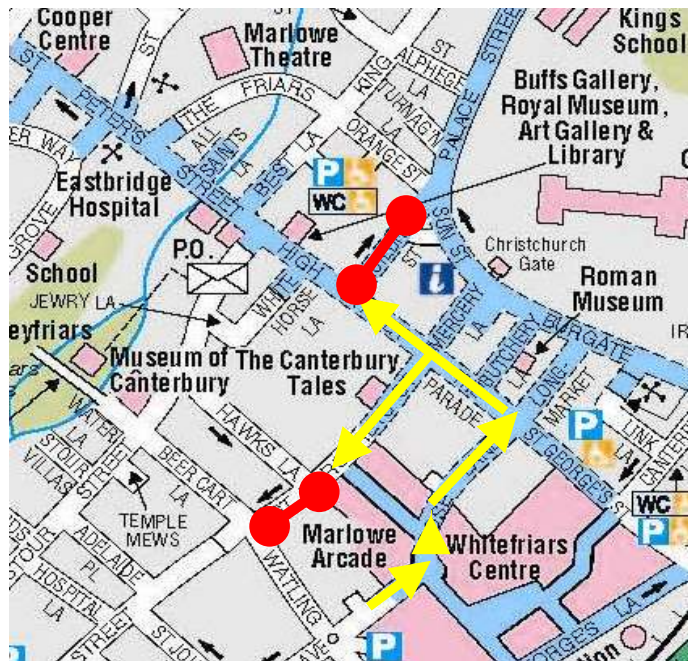


This rank was suggested because of its location close to the two food shops in the city centre (Marks & Spencer and Tesco). The panel felt that at present members of the public, in particular elderly shoppers, struggle to reach other taxi ranks if they have been shopping in either of these two stores. The proposal is to create a two-car rank/pick up point on Rose Lane as close to the bollard protecting the pedestrian area as possible, with taxis turning in the delivery area behind Bhs.

Driver Comments: The drivers were in favour of this proposal as many of their regular customers do struggle with their shopping, and would welcome access to taxis at a point closer to the city centre shops.

Recommendation 4: To create a two car rank/pick up point at Rose Lane.

Proposal 5: The creation of a night time only rank at the Beer Cart Lane end of St Margaret's Street and the restriction of Hawks Lane to traffic in the evening.



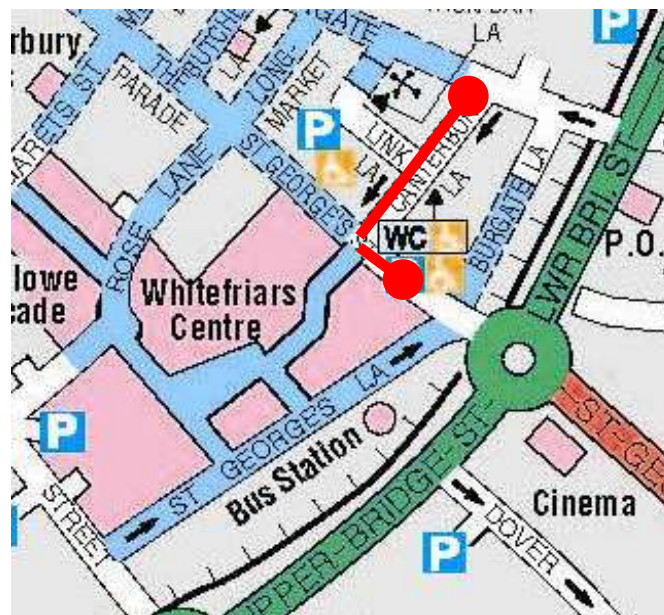
Working on the principle that taxis should always be waiting as close as possible to night time venues the panel identified St Margaret's Street as an area of particular concern, specifically because of the location of three high profile venues. Concerns are often raised by the residents of Hawks Lane about the noise created by taxis using their road to access these venues.

The panel's proposals are specifically designed to mitigate these problems and remove noisy revellers from this area as quickly as possible. If recommendation 3 is successful then the possibility of taxis turning into the High Street end of St Margaret's Street and ranking close to three late night venues then becomes an option.

Driver Comments: all drivers supported this proposal.

Recommendation 5: That, if recommendation 3 is successful a night time rank be created in St Margaret's Street close to the three high profile evening venues and that Hawks Lane be restricted to all traffic.

Proposal 6: The variation of ranking arrangements in Canterbury Lane and St Georges Street.



The panel are aware of drivers concerns over the current arrangement of the taxi rank in Canterbury Lane. However there does not appear to be an immediate and obvious solution to this problem. The proposal to extend the end of the rank around the corner into St Georges Street was suggested.

Driver Comments: The drivers felt that the rank had been more successful previously, when it stretched round to the former McDonalds. This proposal would not be feasible, in part due to the turning circle of articulated lorries that used the road. This proposal could result in taxis queuing across the pedestrian flow. The panel also considered the expense if the road was widened at this point.

Some of the drivers suggested there could be other solutions such as moving the rank to the opposite side of the street, as at present they are forced to load wheelchair users from the roadside rather than the kerbside.

Recommendation 6:

That Highway engineers investigate alternative solutions for ranking arrangements in the Canterbury Lane area including use of the area between Burgate Lane, Canterbury Lane and Link Lane.

Other Issues raised by drivers

1. Rank in The Friars: Many of the drivers were unaware that there was already an existing and unused rank in The Friars close to the Marlowe Theatre.

Recommendation 7: That the existing rank in The Friars, which is currently not delineated on the road, be marked out and promoted.

2. Use of rank by non-taxis: The drivers raised the issue of use of their ranks by non-taxis and asked that illegal use of ranks be better enforced.

Recommendation 8: That The Council seeks clarification of the policing of the taxi ranks and encourages greater enforcement by the relevant authority

3. Access to Brymore Road during restricted times: The drivers have complained that there is great confusion over the use of the Bus gate at peak times. The Officers have confirmed there was a formal decision to allow taxis to use Brymore Road 3 years ago. This has never been implemented due to a disagreement over who should meet the cost of replacing the signage.

Recommendation 9: That this anomaly be solved by The Council funding the amount necessary for the signage to be amended.

4. Coastal ranks: The drivers welcomed this review but requested that a similar review be undertaken for the coastal towns. They were particularly concerned about the new parking restrictions in Whitstable and for a seasonal taxi rank be provided in Central Herne Bay in the summer.

Recommendation 10: This exercise be repeated for the coastal towns particularly as there had been no coastal members on this review.

5. Taxi regulation: The main concern raised by the drivers continues to be the number of vehicles licensed by the City Council. They maintain that the supply far exceeds the demand. The drivers felt this situation had worsened because of the taxi and uni buses. They were assured by the licensing officers that the operation of both of these services were fully within the law. The driver's principle point in raising this is their request that the Council limit the number of licences issued.

Upon investigation, the panel ascertained that the issue of licences is governed by the principle of regulation/deregulation. This is governed by the

Traffic Regulation Act. The Council could only regulate numbers if it had undertaken a survey on demand, which would cost in the region of £20,000.

Recommendation 11: The relevant Officers prepare an options paper for discussion by The Executive to properly gauge the likely cost, outcome and long term effect regulation would have on public transport and the taxi trade.

6. Use of Bus Station: The drivers stated that in the evening coaches from London and Dover made use of the bus station. Coach passengers had to carry their cases to the taxis across the bus station. Therefore, it would be sensible to facilitate use of the bus station by Hackney Carriages at off peak times.

Recommendation 12: That discussions be held with Stagecoach on the feasibility of this proposal.

7. Sleeper ranks; the drivers mentioned there was nowhere to leave their taxis for a short period to take comfort breaks.

Upon investigation the panel were informed by the Parking Services Manager that Hackney Carriages were entitled to use car parks on payment of a fee.

8. Communications with licensing staff: The drivers raised various issues related to the length of time the vehicle could be licensed, the condition of vehicles and communication between licensing officers and themselves. Licensing officers had agreed to make themselves available to Hackney drivers on a regular basis to facilitate a free flow of information, better enforcement and to guarantee the highest possible quality of service to the public.

Other issues from the review

Ambassadorial Scheme: Neil McCollum (Tourism Manager) presented evidence to the panel on the use in other towns of selected drivers as ambassadors. Hackney badge holders, particularly those that make regular use of the stations, could be encouraged to take a basic course in the City's history and amenities. They could then be issued with an enhanced badge allowing them to act as a taxi ambassador service. Their enhanced status could be marketed with Hotels and tourist outlets.

To encourage drivers to join, the ambassador scheme could give consideration to giving them a suitable inducement such as meeting 50% of the cost of a station permit or a reduction in their Hackney licence renewal fee. The tourism department would then undertake to provide the drivers on the ambassador scheme with regular updates on events, exhibitions and festivals for their customers.

Recommendation 13: That the Tourism Manager provide a report for consideration by the appropriate body

New Taxi Association: One of the most positive outcomes from this review has been the encouragement it has given taxi drivers to form a representative organisation able to speak on behalf of the Hackney trade. The panel wish to pay tribute to the work of those representatives in helping the panel in preparing this report. Now that there is an organisation in place, which can speak on behalf of the Hackney Carriage trade, the panel believe it is imperative that the newly improved relations between the taxi drivers and the Council are maintained.

Recommendation 14: That The Council considers the previous recommendations and takes any action as quickly as possible

Recommendation 15: That a Councillor, preferably a member of The Executive be designated a champion to liaise with the taxi driver association. The Chairman of the General Purposes Committee or the Licensing Committee (as appropriate) should also establish regular contact with that Association.