



Jane Lyons: deregulation benefits of taxis are simple; they've helped Guildford become a safer place

Licensed to take you home?

It's the end of the evening, it's pouring, you're desperate to get home – but you can't find a cab. Follow our tips

The combination of closing time and many people hunting for a lift can lead to tense frustration, especially while waiting at a taxi rank. 'People queue-jumping and all that sort of stuff is an obvious flash point,' said Guildford police's Inspector JP Davies.

In these circumstances, it's tempting to jump into the first car for hire you can find. But be cautious. In London alone, there's a monthly average of ten sexual assaults on women carried out by illegal cab drivers.

All taxis and minicabs must be licensed by one of the UK's 343 different licensing authorities. In the capital, the licensing body

is Transport for London. Outside the capital it's the district/borough council or unitary authority, depending on where you live.

There are around 68,000 taxis, also known as hackney carriages, in England and Wales (including 21,000 in London alone), with a further 123,000 private-hire vehicles or minicabs. Scotland has just over 10,000 of each and Northern Ireland has a total of 9,400.

The simple difference between taxis and minicabs is that the former can be hailed in the street. Many taxis, like London's black cabs, are purpose built, something that is now being increasingly required in other cities and towns. About a third of all taxis are ordinary cars that can often be recognised by a roof sign. A minicab must be booked via a central licensed operator. It's illegal for minicabs to pick up passengers if they're flagged down.

Quality and safety

Each authority is responsible for setting quality standards for both taxis and minicabs – including specifying training procedures and codes of conduct for drivers as well as the type of cab and safety checks it must go through. Some 73 authorities, including Leeds, require all their hackney carriage drivers to take a Driving Standards Agency test

Ken Gray, Principal Licence Enforcement Officer at Peterborough City Council, argues

that national standards are needed so that all taxis follow the same rules and regulations wherever they are: 'I'd like to see a common prayer book that we all use.'

In some areas strict restrictions on the number of taxis are in place. Where these controls occur, the licences themselves can become a valuable commodity that can be traded for vast sums of money.

A report by Oxford City Council noted that many drivers see their licence as their retirement fund that can be sold for more than £60,000.

In November 2003 the Office of Fair Trading recommended that local authorities remove restrictions on licensing, unless they could provide evidence that demand for taxis in their area was fully met. It estimated that this would create up to 15,000 new taxis in the UK.

Why restrictions were removed

According to the Department for Transport, 239 licensing authorities no longer have restrictions. One such authority is Guildford, Surrey, which changed in 2005.

Robert Mattock, Licensing Manager at Guildford Borough Council, believes it's been a great success: 'Customers are really benefiting from the increased number of taxis.' Since deregulation the number of taxis on the road has risen from 99 to 135 and, according to Mr Mattock, this means that taxis are available all day and people don't have to wait too long for one late at night.

One big advantage of the extra taxis, he says, is that the town centre clears more quickly after closing time. He said: 'It's led to a reduction in fights and arguments at taxi ranks – people are not there long enough to get involved.'

Inspector Davies agrees there has been an improvement in Guildford at closing time but believes it is due to a mixture of factors. 'There has been a difference but I can't honestly say it's down to extra taxis,' he said.

A new taxi rank has opened in the town and changes in opening laws have also helped ease congestion when pubs close.

Jane Lyons, landlady and chairwoman of Guildford Pub Watch, which promotes safe,

Minicabs cannot be flagged down in the street

SHARE YOUR EXPERIENCES

We'd like to hear your experiences of taxis and minicabs. Please email your stories to letters@which.co.uk or write to us at **Which?, PO Box 44, Hertford X SG14 1SH.**

All you need to know about ensuring a safe journey

Q What's the difference between a hackney carriage/taxi and a private-hire vehicle/minicab?

A A hackney carriage is what we commonly call a taxi. It originates from the 17th century and means a horse (hack)-drawn carriage for hire. Unlike minicabs (private-hire vehicles), a taxi can be hailed and the driver asked to take a passenger. Minicabs must be booked through a licensed operator.

Q With deregulation why don't all minicabs just become taxis?

A Taxis are often customised and expensive vehicles,

subject to more tests.

Q Do all drivers have criminal records checks?

A All licensed drivers for taxis and minicabs must undergo a records check.

Q When you flag down a taxi, can the driver refuse to take you where you want to go?

A Taxis are licensed to operate within a certain region. This means they can't refuse to take you within this area unless they have a reasonable excuse. Different laws apply in London: a driver can't refuse to take you if the journey is less than 12 miles (20 miles for airport taxis).

Q Is a meter compulsory? If not, how can I tell whether I'm being ripped off?

A It is not compulsory for taxis to have a meter. It's a local authority decision. Most authorities require a tariff sheet to be displayed. Some minicabs have meters but you should always try to negotiate before you book. Minicab fares are set by the operators themselves

Q Do taxis have to be accessible to all?

A The Disability Discrimination Act 1995 requires reasonable provision be made for access for disabled people, but it's up to different

licensing bodies to decide policy on this access. Some authorities, like London, require all taxis (but not minicabs) to be wheelchair accessible. Others require a proportion to have this facility.

Q Are taxis cheaper than minicabs?

A No. Taxis are on average slightly more expensive than minicabs – a result of greater regulation, they say.

Q Do children travelling in cabs require a car seat?

A No. Taxis and minicabs are exempt from the rules which were introduced in September 2006 about the use of child car restraints.

secure social drinking in pubs, said: 'Alcohol-related crime incidents are down about 18 to 20 per cent in the town centre.' And that, she claims is the result of more taxis and staggered opening hours.

However, Nick Edwards, a driver and owner of a Guildford taxi firm, is less convinced that cabs are available throughout the day. He says that since deregulation taxi drivers cherry-pick the hours they work – often when demand is high and there is less traffic.

The one thing deregulation hasn't done is make it cheaper to hail a ride. Local

The only thing that hasn't happened is cheaper fares

authorities still set the maximum cost of fares and, although drivers are allowed to undercut them, it's not common practice.

Currently 77 authorities maintain the heavy restrictions on taxi licensing. Oxford City Council argues that it regularly carries out a survey of taxi levels and will issue additional licences if there is a demand. It believes deregulation would lead to high levels of congestion and extra pollution.

For Jane Lyons the benefits of deregulation are simple: 'Having more licensed taxis on a Friday night will always be a good thing.'

PRIDE IN PETERBOROUGH

Ken Gray, *Peterborough City Council*
Peterborough, where Ken is Principal Licence Enforcement Officer, launched a competition to find its number one taxi driver to promote best practice. 'We're looking for good ambassadors for the city,' he said. The top driver was judged on several factors, including customer comments, the taxi's condition and standards of dress and personal hygiene, before taking a driving and written test.

Ken believes the competition has put some pride back in to the drivers: 'You can see them with a dustpan and brush cleaning out their vehicles.'

The city also operates a penalty points system to root out bad drivers. Penalty points are given for infringements from not wearing a badge to having no fire extinguisher. Drivers can even be fined for smoking in the cab or playing loud music.



Ken Gray (far right) congratulates Peterborough's number one taxi driver

Safety tips

The Suzy Lamplugh Trust offers advice on travelling in a taxi or minicab

- Always use a licensed car.
 - Carry the number of a trusted, licensed company with you.
 - If possible, book in advance.
- Ask for the driver's name as well as make and colour of the car. Always confirm the driver's details when they arrive.
- If you order a cab in a public space, try not to let people overhear your details – anyone can pretend to be your ride.
 - If possible share a cab with a friend. Sit in the back.
 - If you chat to the driver, do not give out personal details.
 - Text the cab's registration number and details to a friend or family member. Make sure the driver sees you doing so. If he is completely legitimate, he will understand why you are doing this.
 - If you feel threatened, trust your instincts – ask the driver to stop in a busy area and get out.

For more information visit www.suzylamplugh.org