

Decent and Good Work in the Platform Economy:

Private Hire and Taxi Work in Nottingham. Briefing Paper

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Work Futures Research Group and full report - <https://bit.ly/NTUWorkFutures>

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During 2018 and 2019 a research team at Nottingham Trent University conducted research concerning working conditions for private hire and Hackney taxi drivers in Nottingham, England. We identified a complex set of insecurities and vulnerabilities facing drivers, a lack of protections, and rapid changes driven by the growth of online platforms. There were strong indications of an over-supply of drivers, leading to unhealthy competition, which local authorities are not empowered to address under current legislation. Drivers' formal designation as self-employed gives them few legal protections, and England's regulatory framework accounts only for the safety and wellbeing of passengers, not drivers. We recommend:

- Recognise private hire drivers as workers, who would thereby be entitled to an hourly minimum living wage from their operator; this could improve their economic security by reducing the incentive for drivers to ply for hire and for operators to recruit excessive numbers of drivers relative to customer demand;
- Restrict private hire vehicles to taking jobs within the domain of the council to which they are registered, to improve the consistency of enforcement powers;
- Introduce powers to allow local authorities in England to cap the maximum number of private hire cars registered within the authority;
- Commission further research into drivers' experiences and operators' perspectives, to build a more comprehensive picture.

Since this research was conducted, the Covid-19 pandemic has dramatically affected every aspect of society. Yet while much has changed, private hire and Hackney drivers continue to play a vital role, and in the first stage of the pandemic drivers died at three times the rate for the general adult population. The authors hope the longer-standing issues covered in this report will be helpful for understanding the implications of the pandemic for drivers, and for thinking creatively about how to improve their working conditions in the future.

Additional Findings

- Private hire and Hackney drivers in Nottingham enjoy some forms of independence, for example regarding their hours of work; yet economic insecurity, unpredictable incomes, and a weak correspondence between hours worked and money earned, places drivers under considerable pressure and requires them to navigate between the competing demands of operators or platforms, customers and the City Council, as they try to earn enough to survive;

- Despite their many differences, the private hire and Hackney taxi sectors operate in the same market, and in Nottingham this has led to perceived competition; however, examples from other countries show that cooperation between different types of drivers is also possible and can be mutually beneficial;
- High vehicle running costs, low fares and operators' fees combine with over supply to result in low incomes for some private hire drivers; this situation encourages them to break the law by plying for hire and, in consequence, increases further the degree of competition with Hackney drivers for business;
- The wider economic and labour market context channels new drivers into the sector and offers few alternatives for those wanting to change jobs; this helps to sustain an oversupply of drivers, despite low pay and job insecurity; this suggests that enforcement-led responses may be ineffective
- National legislation prevents the City Council from capping the number of licences issued to private hire cars, and allows cars registered by other councils to operate in Nottingham; this creates many problems for enforcement and allows the oversupply of cars to continue;
- Inflexible Council rules combine with a reliance on the subjective judgements of individual CPOs and Council officers, creating risks for bias, while some drivers described appeal mechanisms as inaccessible or obscure;
- Trade unions and other drivers' organisations play a range of important roles, but interviews suggested that communication between drivers' organisations and the City Council is often experienced as difficult by all parties;
- Although we found examples of successful drivers' cooperatives in other cities, the cooperative model of organisation does not seem to have been attempted in Nottingham so far; however, there were suggestions that the Council might be able to assist with this;
- Working conditions in the private hire and Hackney sectors are influenced by a combination of factors, including wider conditions in the local and regional labour market, transport infrastructure, patterns of work and consumption, local and national regulatory environments, and institutional arrangements of operators, drivers and regulators; this complex situation calls for further research.

Our findings are informed by an exploratory literature review and in-depth interviews with eight individuals from four local drivers' organisations, the City Council, and an organisation supporting students on nights out. These data were used to explore drivers' working conditions, to which established criteria for 'Good Work' and 'Decent Work' were applied, and to consider possible strategies for improvement. Stakeholders were consulted and engaged throughout the creation of this report. Their views and thoughts are combined within this report. We thank them for their time. The views and ideas expressed within this report are those of the authors.

The research team is happy to discuss our findings with you please contact Dr Tom Vickers:

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