

Notes from Transport Committee meeting with Uber 28 July 2015

Present: Valerie Shawcross CBE AM (Chair); Caroline Pidgeon MBE AM; Richard Tracey AM

Guests: Jo Bertram, General Manager, Uber London; Andrew Byrne, Uber London

The meeting began with an introductory presentation from Uber explaining the functionality of the app, including booking processes and safety features.

The attendees discussed the process for verifying that partners carry full commercial insurance, including automatic log-off from the Uber platform when insurance documents expire.

The attendees discussed the safety features of the app including the use of the rating system to ensure that partner-drivers meet quality standards set by Uber. Uber explained that they also ran classes for partners on how to improve their ratings.

Uber explained the process for using anonymised phone number data so that partner-drivers did not have personal contact details of passengers unless these were given to them by the rider. The anonymised number expires after thirty minutes.

Uber told the meeting that driver flexibility was a key part of Uber's appeal to and that partner-drivers were also reassured by being paid weekly and not having to worry about people not paying their fares. They said that this was why the company had experienced unprecedented growth in partner-driver numbers. (Uber told the Committee that they had seen an unprecedented growth with 18,000 partner-drivers, of whom around 4000 were on the road at any time)

Market conditions

Uber indicated that they were experiencing huge demand, especially in areas not traditionally served by the established licensed taxi and private hire market, such as outer London. The potential impact of the night tube on demand for services was also discussed.

Uber also discussed the potential for developing services which would allow for further economies for passengers and reduce the number of vehicles on the road.

Views on the proposed private hire cap

Uber indicated that it did not agree with this proposal. They suggested that congestion should be tackled by reducing reliance on private cars. They suggested that a cap would have a negative impact on service levels for passengers in zone 3-6, while having only a limited effect on congestion in central London.

Heathrow airport

Uber explained the functionality of the app which prevented partner-drivers from accepting jobs except in the designated areas they are allowed to wait. They indicated that the cars may be visible in the app but cannot be booked by passengers. Uber indicated they are working closely with Heathrow to reduce the amount of Uber partners spend waiting in the vicinity and that they encouraged partners not to congregate there.

Out of licensing area

The Committee asked for an explanation of how Uber prevents partner-drivers licensed in other cities operating in London. Uber explained that partners were assigned to specific licensing areas within the app that accorded with the location of their licence and could not receive jobs outside area and never in London. Every report Uber have ever received of partners working outside area were investigated and disciplinary action could be taken if needed, but drivers could also simply be using their car for private purposes inside London (or dropping off a booking accepted in their licensed area)

Pre-booking

Uber said that all its cars are pre-booked; the average waiting time is around 3 minutes in central London.

Jo Bertram explained that an extended reservation service was not offered as Uber had the reliability to offer a car within 10-15 minutes anyway. This also reduces 'dead' time for partners between bookings.

Surge pricing

The attendees discussed the rationale for surge pricing (to keep more partner-driver on the road at busy periods) and the need to be more proactive about communicating surge prices clearly during major events like tube strikes.

Payment to partners

Action: Uber undertook to provide more details to the Committee about the requirements for driver payments to be made into UK bank account and indicated that full records of all journeys and payments are kept and can be made available.

Uber explained the model of charging for Uber black taxi services through the app, calculated by entering the fare from the licensed taxi meter.

Complaints procedure

Uber explained its complaints handling procedure, saying that passengers can complain by leaving feedback in the app, by reply to their receipt, can email or contact on Facebook and Twitter. Uber direct all complaints to email so that they can look up the details of the trip more easily. They cover emails 24/7 and if there is a serious incident, Uber will call the customer.

All complaints are logged on the driver record and the driver will be immediately suspended if there is a serious incident. Uber indicates they work closely with the cab enforcement unit and the Metropolitan police as needed. A review committee looks into serious incidents to determine if a driver can be reactivated. Any partner-drivers permanently removed from the platform are notified to TfL.

Action: Uber will provide the Committee with the number of complaints that they have received.

Uber do maintain a landline but they divert this and was mainly used for TfL and police enquiries, prior to being publicly disclosed by TfL before the Transport Committee. Uber is a business that operates online and customers choose to book online and use online methods for

contact. When Uber provide in app methods of communication it also provides a clear audit trail. However, they would consider looking at phone-based options if there was clear customer demand for it.

Uber indicated that the landline is currently diverted to voicemail as they were receiving high levels of abusive calls. Uber also indicated that they were not aware of any requirement to have a landline for bookings in the 1998 (Private Hire) Act. The company has been very clear about the fact that it is an app-based booking service.

The Committee requested the following information in writing:

Average length of time to respond to complaints

Number of drivers suspended from the app and for what period

Number of drivers referred to TfL for licence suspension.

Action: Uber agreed to provide this information

Relationship with TfL

The attendees discussed the nature of Uber's relationship with TfL. Uber said that due to the scrutiny the company is under, they undergo more frequent checks than other operators. Uber also indicated that, as they had been unsuccessful in their repeated attempts to join established trade representative bodies, they had little alternative other than to engage in direct dialogue with TfL.

Update on reports of hacked Uber accounts

Uber has set up a dedicated team to investigate these claims. Reports of account takeovers are a result of data breaches from other major e-commerce and internet services , and people using the same passwords for multiple online accounts. Uber have set up a two-step verification process so that hackers are less able to conceal changes to customer's accounts. Every trip that was taken with a hacked account has been refunded.

Driver working hours

The attendees discussed the issue of long working hours potentially leading to dangerous driving.

Uber explained that once a driver has been working for a certain amount of time, they will be logged out of the system, though they cannot tell whether a driver has done a previous shift with another operator prior to logging onto the Uber platform.

Some councils are able to tell you whether a driver can only work with one operator and they keep record of who that operator is. From a driver's perspective the ability to work for multiple operators leads to greater choice.

Private hire regulations review

Action: Uber to share a copy of their submission.

Uber has recently become a topographical testing centre and have been described as the most professional testing centre by TfL. Uber is interested in making sure partner-drivers are as high quality as possible. They support English language training and called for a higher standard of topographical knowledge. They are also interested in looking at the introduction of training around safeguarding children and vulnerable adults.

Uber's opinion is that the process for licensing and renewing licences takes too long. There are issues around DBS checks and the time it takes for these to come back, they would like to see a digitised DBS service. They would like to see the multi-operating environment preserved.

Uber said that there should be a wider discussion around the private hire regulation review and the taxi regulation review because they do not think that either of these are particularly future proof. Any future regulatory framework should take into account GPS and mobile technology and consider a framework that ensures customers are safe, that vehicles are accessible and that there are fewer barriers of entry into the market for both private hire and licensed taxis.

Accessibility of the Uber 'fleet'.

Uber are very interested in working with GLA and TfL to make their vehicles more accessible. The supply of wheelchair accessible private hire vehicles is very low but Uber would like to work with GLA and other relevant authorities to increase this. Because there is no legal requirement and because they are more expensive, licence holders do not buy them. Uber would like to look at a way to incentivise partner-drivers to buy more accessible vehicles.

With the Uber app, as long as they have enough wheelchair accessible vehicles, it would be very easy to add a button to the app for customers to use if they require these vehicles.

Pilots are currently running in US cities and in New York where there is a wheelchair accessible button for users to select if they need. Uber is very useful for those with hearing or visual disabilities. Uber now has a deaf partner-driver on the platform.

Action: Uber to send the committee details of this New York pilot.

Forthcoming challenges

Dealing with the perception that Uber are breaking rules or are unlicensed is a main challenge. It would be helpful to be part of a private hire trade body, they would be able to be more transparent and work across organisations.

Uber believes it is important to have discussions with other trade bodies to be able to voice issues and feedback. By setting up a cross-industry task force, different groups would be able to work together to look at issues such as accessibility and how to improve this for private hire companies. This will also help to resolve ongoing disputes.

Uber says it is very popular with a huge number in the UK and this should be reflected in the regulations because it is a reflection of choice. Uber believes it provides a new and innovative option for consumers and partner-drivers. This technology has the ability to make the industry

more responsive and transparent than it has been in the past and any issues that do occur can be resolved because of the extra information recorded throughout the journey.

In terms of future market changes, Uber predicts that there would be an increase in demand for pooled services. It believes the market will remain highly competitive with increases in the number of apps and a greater number of cross-UK operators, which represents a challenge for regulators with drivers operating outside their home jurisdiction.

Uber predicts far lower usage of private cars in cities. They also indicated that congestion charging may need to be reviewed again as part of a wider effort to disincentivise low occupancy, private car use in cities.